GP frequent consulters: their prevalence, natural history, and contribution to rising workload

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SUMMARY
A small proportion of patients use a disproportionate amount of general practitioners’ (GPs’) time. We demonstrate here that such frequent attending behaviour tends to persist through five-year follow-up, suggesting the need for the development of specific management strategies. We also show that, at any rate in one practice, total workload is increasing dramatically, and that frequent consulters make up a large part of the increase.

Keywords: frequent consulters; general practice, primary care; outcomes; follow-up.

Introduction

Frequent consulters (FCs) use the most GP resources, have many and chronic complaints, and often have a difficult relationship with staff. Although many studies have highlighted the problem,1,2 the natural history of frequent consulting remains largely undefined.3 We therefore purposed to determine the prevalence and outcome of FC behaviour in relation to total practice workload.

Method

Frequent consulters were selected using routinely collected 1990–1995 practice computer system (VAMP) data at Hollow Way Surgery, Oxford: a three-partner practice in a stable, mixed residential/industrial area. The 6000 patients registered at the surgery were predominantly from social classes III-V, and most had been registered for many years.

We defined an FC as having more than 12 surgery consultations per consulting patient also rose from 3.20 to 3.96. The percentage increases for visits, especially night visits, are even larger (data not shown).

A small proportion of patients use a disproportionate amount of GPs’ time. We demonstrate here that such frequent attending behaviour tends to persist through five-year follow-up, suggesting the need for the development of specific management strategies. We also show that, at any rate in one practice, total workload is increasing dramatically, and that frequent consulters make up a large part of the increase.

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ence mass consultation behaviour, this group of high utilizers may be an appropriate group for GPs to focus on, should they wish to try to exert some control over their total workload.

References


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Table 1. Frequent consulters’ contribution to total workload at Hollow Way Surgery, Oxford. An FC is defined as having more than 12 surgery consultations, or more than six day visits, or more than four night visits, per calendar year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of patients registered</th>
<th>Number of FCs</th>
<th>Total consultations by FCs</th>
<th>Consultations per FC</th>
<th>Total practice consultations</th>
<th>Percentage total consultations by FCs</th>
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<td>655</td>
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<td>11,553</td>
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