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Research papers this month

Validity of symptom and clinical measures of asthma severity

Symptom and pulmonary function measures of asthma severity are used for severity classification in practice guidelines. In this study, Tze Pin Ng studied a cohort of adult asthmatic patients to validate initial symptom and forced expiratory volume measures of asthma severity with the subsequent risks of exacerbations resulting in emergency room visits, hospitalisation, and sickness absence from work. The results support the validity and clinical utility of a simple clinical score based on symptom and FEV₁ measures, and self-assessed measures of change in severity, for risk classification in contemporary clinical practice guidelines.

In-practice evaluation of whole-blood *H. pylori* test

Quartero *et al* note that approximately 10% of patients presenting with dyspepsia have peptic ulcers; the large majority of which are related to infection with *Helicobacter pylori*. The aim of this descriptive study was to evaluate the clinical effectiveness of a whole-blood serology test for infection with *H. pylori* in detecting peptic ulcer disease (PUD). The results confirm the relatively poor performance of the BM-test and shows the limited diagnostic value of *H. pylori* office-tests for detecting PUD in primary care. The authors conclude that the discriminative value of the test result is too small to support either a 'test-and-endoscope' or a 'test-and-treat' strategy.

Needs assessment in primary care

Health needs assessment can guide the appropriate shift to primary care by identifying the most effective and efficient resource allocation to meet the needs of populations. In this study, Murie *et al* aimed to examine general practitioners' awareness and experience of needs assessment, to identify barriers, and to ascertain how better progress might be made in the future. They conclude that the motivation and attitude of the majority of GPs present a barrier to needs assessment in primary care, and that GPs will require more resources and training if they are to undertake this responsibility.

Eating disordered patients: personality, alexithymia, and implications

Beales and Dolton note that eating disorders are becoming more apparent in primary care; however, descriptions of character traits related to people with eating disorders are rarely reported in the primary care literature. The aim of this questionnaire study was to analyse the character traits and degree of alexithymia of a selected group of women with active eating disorders and those in recovery, and to recommend responses by members of the primary care team that might meet the needs of such individuals. The results emphasise the difference between those with active eating disorders who achieved high scores for privacy, introversion, and alexithymia, and those who have recovered. It is suggested that effective screening and needs assessment will facilitate a more appropriate and prompt therapeutic response.

Influenza vaccination in asthma

Despite the recommendation of the DoH that patients with asthma receive an annual vaccination against 'flu, Innes *et al* note that uptake remains unsatisfactory with many patients suspicious that vaccination is harmful. The authors carried out a multicentre study to examine the effect of 'flu vaccination on asthmatic patients typical of a general practice study. The results show that influenza is an important cause of morbidity and mortality in asthmatics, and confirms the safety of 'flu vaccination in these patients. Finally, the authors suggest that GPs should consider ways in which uptake can be improved.

Do practice-based preventive child health services affect the use of hospitals?

Hull *et al* note that acute paediatric admissions and child health clinics have increased over the past 20 years, although provision is less common in areas of deprivation where hospital use is greatest. The aim of this cross-sectional retrospective study was to investigate the contribution of practice-based preventive child health services to rates of hospital utilisation in children under five years of age. The results show significant associations between the amount of health visiting time available to the practice population and rates of acute admission and outpatient referral among these children. The authors conclude that these findings suggest that increasing health visitor provision could contribute to lower paediatric emergency admission and outpatient referral rates.

Management confidence and decisions to refer to hospital

McKinstry notes that there is concern about the educational impact and possible stress on registrars of new out-of-hours cooperatives. To compare the confidence in managing out-of-hours problems of registrars in traditional on-call rotas and cooperatives with that of their trainers, an analysis of log diaries of out-of-hours experiences was carried out. The results show that, while many registrars are confident in their work and are using their trainer for information appropriately, some are not, and registrars may be referring to hospital at a much higher rate than their trainers.

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Journal article

1. Handysides S. Morale in general practice: is change the problem or the solution? *BMJ* 1994; **308**: 32-34.

Chapter in a book

8. Bogduk N. Sources of low back pain. In: Jayson M (ed). *Lumbar spine and back pain*. 4th edn. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1992.

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