Study of patient referral pathways created as a result of the 45-49 year health check (MBS item 717)

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Background & Rationale

Introduction

With the continual introduction of new MBS items applicable to GPs, it is important to not only assess the effectiveness of the item, but also the use of the item amongst practitioners.

The 45-49 year health check (MBS Item 717) was introduced in November 2006 to promote prevention and early detection of chronic disease by improving GP referral patterns to programs that assist patients make and maintain lifestyle changes. Since the national introduction of the health check, there has been an average of 1,956 uses per 100,000 population total Australia-wide (Medicare Australia).

Previous research

There has been little research into the effects of the health check to date. Recent studies of the health check item have examined the usage of the item across Australia (Chan et al, 2008) and the impact of the health check on clinical management/practice and the impact of the health check to date.

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Aims of the Linkages Study

Our study, known as the Linkages Study, builds on the previous research with a focus on the referral processes and utilisation of the item by GPs. The study aims to examine:

• referral processes by GPs;
• possible lifestyle changes made by patients; and
• patient views on the continuum of care provided as a result of the health check.

Method

There are three phases to the Linkages Study:

1. Recruitment of GP practices / GPs;
2. Data extraction and analysis; and
3. Recruitment of patients and telephone interviews.

Recruitment of GPs

GP practices and individual GPs will be recruited either directly or through supporting Divisions of General Practice. Participating GPs will be asked:

a) extract patient data;

b) invite eligible patients to participate on behalf of the researchers; and

c) attend a focus group at the end of the study to discuss the research outcomes.

GPs and GP practices will be financially reimbursed for participating in the study.

Data extraction

Healthcare Management Advisors (HMA) worked with PEN Computing Systems (PCS) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) to develop a new component of the Clinical Audit Tool (CAT) software that enables the extraction of MBS item 717 data.

Clinical Audit Tool (CAT)

The modifications to the CAT tool enable clinical software data (from Medical Director version 2 or 3) and billing software data (from PracSoft) to be linked during extraction.

The new 45–49 Check tab of CAT displays the information on patients who have received the health check in graphical and report formats for:

a) mail-out to eligible patients; and

b) demographic and referral information required by HMA for analysis.

The information can be easily exported to Microsoft Excel for analysis and future use.

Recruitment of patients

Eligible patients wishing to participate in the study will be contacted for a brief telephone interview to discuss their experiences subsequent to the health check and any resulting lifestyle modifications.

Findings to date

Linkage of clinical and billing information

The study has shown that the CAT software is able to link both clinical patient information and practice billing data. With further development, this function of CAT could provide GPs with the capacity to assess their own data and compare it to national, state and Division level information on MBS item use. This would potentially allow GPs to compare themselves and their practice to benchmarked usage and referral levels for the Division or state.

Benefit to the community

The linkage of clinical and billing information achieved in the study is an example of how data collection and analysis can be of direct benefit to the GP and GP practice, which may promote improved data quality. The linkage between billing and clinical information also provides a novel system for the follow-up of eligible patients who have not yet had the health check.

Next Steps

The study is currently in the GP / GP practice recruitment phase.

The study provides a unique opportunity for GPs and GP practices to participate in the nationwide study with the potential to:

• examine GP awareness and participation in health promotion;

• examine GP and patient activity in relation to the 45–49 year old health check; and

• explore quality assurance for data collection and extraction.

Further information

If you would like further information on the linkages study, visit the HMA website: hma.com.au

REFERENCES

• Medicare Australia website: www.medicareaustralia.gov.au

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