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 1,356 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 changes in risk behaviours by patients (Amoroso et al, 2009).

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 to:
• 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.

Recruitment of patients
The 45-49 year health check (MBS Item 717) 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.

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

Step 1: Select the ‘45-49 Check’ tab
Step 2: Highlight the pie segment for patients with an Item 717 billed in 2007/08
Step 3: Click the ‘Export’ button to re-identify the patients behind this
Step 4: Use the ‘Re-identify Report Export to Excel’ function to create a mail-out list

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

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