

Guidelines, compliance, and effectiveness: a 12 months' audit in an acute district general healthcare trust on the two week rule for suspected colorectal cancer.

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OBJECTIVES: The Department of Health had recently introduced guidelines so that all suspected colorectal cancer patients could be seen by a specialist within two weeks of referral by their general practitioners. The usefulness and practicality of such a decision had been questioned. The aims of this study were to measure the compliance to the guidelines and evaluate the effectiveness of such referrals. **METHODS:** All patients who were referred to the rapid access colorectal clinic between August 2000 and July 2001 were included. **SETTINGS:** Darlington Memorial Hospital and Bishop Auckland General Hospital, both under South Durham Health Care Trust, were considered for the study. **MEASURES:** Date of referral, referring practitioner, time of appointment, reasons for referral, and diagnosis. **RESULTS:** A total of 239 referrals were made; 96.2% of patients were given appointments within two weeks. Rectal bleed was the commonest (32%) cause for referral. Diverticular disease was the most frequent (29%) condition diagnosed. Altogether 97.4% of referrals were incomplete and 37.6% did not comply with the guidelines. Twenty one colorectal cancers (8.9%) were diagnosed. The early cancer detection rate was 4.6%. **CONCLUSIONS:** This audit showed that compliance to the guidelines was associated with a higher cancer detection rate. The majority of patients received appointments within two weeks. Contrary to some speculations, the number of referrals was not limitless. However a high number of referrals failed to adhere to the guidelines. The cancer (particularly early cancer) detection rate was disappointingly low. This does not reflect an efficient system of referral and potential benefits to patients remain questionable.

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