Primary care records improve public health information

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Gaining a fuller and more accurate picture of trends in the most important disease risk factors is now possible, thanks to a project between the NHS Information Centre and QResearch®.

The Public Health Indicators summary reports on trends in obesity, smoking, blood pressure, cholesterol and ethnicity using anonymous data taken from the health records of more than four million patients.

QResearch, a not-for-profit partnership between The University of Nottingham and leading primary care system supplier EMIS, uses data which extends back 17 years. Using the QResearch database, information can be collected on a larger scale and broken down on a localised basis, unlike the Health Survey for England (HSfE).

The findings of the first summary include:

-- 80 per cent of registered patients aged 16+ had smoking information recorded in the last five years with 22 per cent recorded as smokers. Whilst the proportion of patients who smoke has declined over the past five years, there is still a significant gradient between affluent and deprived areas.

-- Smoking rates are more than twice as high in deprived areas compared with affluent areas and this information could be used to target smoking cessation programmes to those at highest risk who have most to gain from smoking cessation interventions.

-- 58 per cent of registered patients aged 16+ had had their body mass index (BMI) recorded in the last five years and 26 per cent were shown to be obese (BMI greater than 30). Levels of obesity continue to rise and are highest in the North and Wales and lowest in London and the South.

-- More patients now have cholesterol measurements recorded on their routine electronic health records. This data, together with other routinely collected data such as age, sex, smoking, body mass index, can be used to estimate cardiovascular risk. This information could be used to target patients with preventative measures, such as lifestyle advice and cholesterol lowering treatments.

QResearch project leader, Professor Julia Hippisley-Cox of The University of Nottingham, said: "The Public Health Indicator data can be used to identify patterns and wider health trends so that resources can be targeted to patients with the greatest need to help avoid further widening health inequalities.

"With input coming directly from GPs spread throughout the country, it is much easier to analyse patterns and trends. This makes it a potentially powerful tool in understanding public health issues."

Access to the summary data underpinning this report is also available through the QResearch website (www.qresearch.org). This will enable anyone involved in public health to access the information, develop health programmes and set targets.

Dr David Stables, Clinical Director of EMIS and a Director of QResearch, said: "The database is designed to show results in a number of different ways and identify patterns, whether across the whole population or specifics related to gender or age.

"Projects like this are only possible with the contribution from EMIS

practices who provide the data on a basis that maintains patient confidentiality."

Source: University of Nottingham