

Wide variation in number of patients GPs refer with suspected cancer

July 31 2012

[Information](#) published today by the National Cancer Intelligence Network (NCIN) reveals wide variation across England in the numbers of patients with suspected cancer that GP practices refer to secondary care.

This is the first time information on cancer referrals from individual GP practices has been made available publically. Amongst other things it shows that the variation in the rate of urgent GP referrals to hospital specialists for patients suspected of having cancer is more than three-fold, ranging from under 830 to over 2,550 urgent referrals in every 100,000 people a year. It also shows a wide gap in the proportion of those patients referred who then go on to be diagnosed with cancer.

Dr. Mick Peake, clinical lead for the National Cancer Intelligence Network (NCIN), said: “The data are not easy to interpret since we do not know what the ‘optimum’ level is for these measures and although the data are adjusted for age, there may be other differences in the characteristics of the patients of a particular GP practice that impact on local referral rates. However the range of the variation is so wide that, at the extremes, it probably reflects differing standards of care.”

These data have already proved valuable to practices, who can use them to benchmark the outcomes of the patients they refer urgently with suspected cancer.

They are now being made available publically as part of the

Government's open data strategy. Anyone will be able to look up information about their GP practice including the number of cancers diagnosed at the practice, the number of people who have screening and the numbers sent through the two-week wait referral system.

Di Riley, associate director for the NCIN's clinical outcomes programme, said: "Although the number of people GPs refer isn't on its own an indicator of how good they are at spotting the early signs of cancer, it's clear from these data that there's variation that needs to be addressed.

"It's important to remember that GPs have a hard job and many of the symptoms of cancer are very similar to many other illnesses. But we must do more to understand the reasons for the variation."

The average GP will only see seven [patients](#) who have [cancer](#) each year. These break down as one case each of breast, bowel, prostate and lung cancers, plus three cancers of other types.

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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