

Decision support tools in cancer referral

When I first qualified, the only ‘decision support tool’ I had was a well-thumbed version of the ‘Cheese and Onion’ (Oxford Handbook of Clinical Medicine), which accompanied me everywhere! Now, we have a wide variety of resources available, many electronically, to support our decision-making.

As we strive for earlier diagnosis of cancer, we are referring people with more subtle earlier signs and symptoms that might indicate a potential cancer. However, deciding who to refer has become much less intuitive and more complicated, which has prompted the development of a number of electronic cancer decision support tools for use in primary care. These are designed to improve diagnostic decision-making in primary care around cancer, but do they actually work?

Evidence for electronic clinical decision support tools (eCDSTs)

There is an absence of robust evidence as to whether eCDSTs improve diagnostic decision-making in primary care. The limited available studies were reviewed in the BJGP (BJGP 2019;69(689):e809).

The review identified three distinct types of tool:

- Tools to use in the consultation: these did not, in general, seem to improve appropriateness of referrals or investigations but, if a referral **was** made, it was probably “better quality”.
- Tools running outside the consultation which flag up people at higher risk of cancer and prompt review: these were shown to potentially improve time to diagnosis of colorectal and prostate cancer.
- Tools supporting interpretation of clinical images, e.g. skin lesions, *may* help GPs make better decisions.

This is an evidence base in its infancy and there is a lot more work to do to determine the optimal tools and the best way to use them – watch this space.

What tools are available?

There are currently many options that help to pick out high-risk patients. These include:

- The QCancer database: can be freely used by patients and professionals.

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- Symptom Checker (based on QCancer): currently being integrated into EMIS, and it is hoped that Vision and other packages will follow. This can be used for individual patients.
- Cancer Decision Support tool developed by Macmillan: runs the Symptom Checker as a batch process and flags patients as high risk, enabling surgeries to consider proactively contacting them and arranging further investigations.

More details and links to these can be found in the *Early cancer diagnosis: quality improvement* article.

There is now a new decision support app and multiplatform tool called 'C the Signs' that integrates NICE recommendations for referral and direct access tests. You simply enter a patient's symptoms and it highlights the relevant referral pathway(s) for them and direct access tests they may need. At present, it can only be commissioned for groups of GPs by CCGs or Cancer Alliances. Do you have access in your area?

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