Reviewer's report

Title: The effects of the Two-Week Rule on NHS colorectal cancer diagnostic services: A literature review

Version: 1 Date: 1 December 2005

Reviewer: William Hamilton

Reviewer's report:

This paper is the first to review the impact of the two-week rule on detection of colorectal cancer. As such it is useful, but there are areas in which it could be improved.

1. Abstract. The last line is actually a result. (major)
2. Background. This is adequate.
3. Methods. I am concerned that the median figure is used for the main outcomes. A weighted average is more appropriate. (major)
4. Results. Table 2 would be more helpful if it gave the raw figures of number of cases diagnosed in the TWR clinics (I could then have checked if the 10.3% figure was a median as stated in the table, or an average as implied by the text). (minor)
5. Discussion. The authors switch between figures based on sensitivity and on specificity rather too glibly. The most glaring example is the first sentence in the discussion. The proportion of TWR clinic referrals that are cancer (10.3%) bears no relation to the aspiration that 90% of all CRCs are diagnosed on the TWR pathway. Indeed to increase the sensitivity towards the (unobtainable) 90% figure, specificity should fall, decreasing the strike-rate in TWR clinics. (minor)
6. In the discussion, the “blame” for poor performance seems to be attributed to the TWR clinics. This is wrong. They work (as stated in the background). What doesn’t work is the Guidelines. Yes, they were reasonably evidence based, but they probably pick up the “barn door” cancer. This also probably explains the lack of staging shift since the introduction of the TWR clinics. Such a shift will appear from the (imminent) screening, and possibly from earlier symptomatic diagnosis of soft symptoms outwith the referral guidelines. (minor)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I have no competing interests