Development of National Electronic Cancer Referral in Ireland: A Solution for a Safer Referral Patient Pathway

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2. The National Healthlink Project
3. The National General Practice Information Technology (GPIT) Group
4. HSE ICT Directorate
5. The Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP)

Service Description and Driver for Patient Safety
The National Cancer Strategy (2006)1 recommended that GPs should have comprehensive information available to them, to enable them assess a patient with suspicious symptoms and findings. Primary care is often the first contact with the health system.

The needs of GPs in relation to cancer were identified in the report ‘Early Detection of Cancer, A Needs Assessment of General Practitioners2’. The common barriers that were identified included:
• Delay in patient presentation
• Lack of clear recommendations
• Inequity of access
• Communication difficulties

Data from the National Cancer Registry shows that 47% of lung cancer patients are stage IV at the time of diagnosis. The development of electronic referral systems aims to increase the number of patients diagnosed at an earlier stage and thereby maximise the potential for cure.

This is a multi-agency project, and involves the NCCP, Healthlink, ICGP, ICT Directorate, HSE and GPIT.

Challenges and Supports
Phase one commenced in 2010 and was complete in 2012. This was followed by Phase two in 2012. Phase three has been piloted and is due for national roll out during 2015 and 2016.

There was some resistance to change from some cancer teams and GPs. The project board was a great support, in particular having a GP member provided wonderful insight and suggestions in how to approach the project and GP community.

References
1. A Strategy for Cancer Control 2006, National Cancer Forum, DOH.
2. Early Detection of Cancer, A Needs Assessment of General Practitioners, Irish College of General Practitioners, 2007
3. Report and Recommendations on Patient Referrals from General Practice to Outpatient and Radiology Services, including the National Standard for Patient Referral Information, HIQA 2011.

Table 1: No. Electronic Cancer Referrals (Breast, Prostate and Lung and Inclusion of Pigmented Lesion for 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of electronic cancer referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>4,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>9,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>13,381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>16,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: The National Healthlink Project, NCCP
* Projected number of referrals based on current number to date

Benefits and Outcomes
46% of all breast, prostate and lung cancer referrals were sent electronically in quarter one in 2015 we hope to achieve a 40% electronic cancer referral rate for breast, prostate and lung cancer referral.

The benefits are as follows:
• Streamline the cancer referral process
• Rapid access for patients who are being referred with a suspected cancer
• Provide automatic confirmation of receipt of GP referral
• Provision of direct access for GPs to the cancer teams
• Reduced costs for GP and HSE
• Introduces a greater degree of safety into the referral process.

The NCCP electronic cancer referral project provides useful lessons for the general electronic referral project. The HIQA report3 suggests electronic referrals will improve patient referral in Ireland.

Patient Safety Initiative
To develop GP electronic referral systems and prompt specialist triage that follow evidence-based clinical pathways. The electronic referral process takes place via The National Healthlink Project (www.healthlink.ie).

Phase one involved developing site-specific cancer referral forms in Healthlink. Referral guidelines and paper referral forms (breast, prostate and lung) were developed by the NCCP. These referral forms were adapted for online use by Healthlink.

Phase two was the development of breast, prostate and lung cancer electronic cancer referral via the four ICGP accredited GP practice management software systems below:
• Complete GP
• Helix Practice Manager
• Health One
• Socrates

Phase three is the development of an integrated web services browser using the NCCP Pigmented Lesion GP Referral Form. This will facilitate the development of future electronic referral forms. The pilot is complete and national roll out has commenced.

Conclusion
The development of electronic cancer referrals will ensure safer patient care.