Under the scan: patients’ views of X-rays and scans in the UK
A joint report with the Patients Association

The Royal College of Radiologists
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Main results and findings

Early diagnosis of serious medical conditions such as cancer is essential to improving patient health outcomes. Delays in reporting of tests such as X-rays, computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) can mean delays in patients receiving appropriate courses of treatment and can lead to increased anxiety for patients, their families and friends.

To help address this in England, in September 2015 the Government announced that it was setting a target of 28 days from referral to test result by 2020.¹ This target was specifically created to help prevent the deaths of 11,000 people per year from cancer.

Based on surveys of UK radiology departments, The Royal College of Radiologists (RCR) estimates that 230,000 patients are currently waiting more than a month for test results.² Of those who are waiting, 12,000 are waiting for the results of CT and MRI scans – tests that are often used to detect cancer.³

Working with the Patients Association, the RCR designed this survey to find out patients’ own experiences, knowledge and views of undergoing diagnostic imaging. It specifically set out to understand patients’ experience of the referral to test result process and their views on recommendations for patients to receive their test results directly.⁴

The main findings are:

1. 85% of patients surveyed received their results within four weeks of their scan. The rest (15%) said they had waited more than one month to hear their results.

2. Most patients had their X-ray or scan explained by a hospital doctor (41%) or their general practitioner (GP) (29%), but 23% (just over 1 in 5 patients) said they didn’t receive any explanation at all.

3. Fewer than half of patients surveyed thought that a radiologist was responsible for interpreting their X-ray or scan (48%). The rest thought it was their hospital consultant (35%) or GP (16%).

4. Over 80% of patients surveyed thought it was a good idea to receive their results directly. If they were to come directly, 63% of patients wanted to receive their results in person and 25% by email or website login.

The survey findings reflect the current lack of capacity in UK radiology services to deliver scan results for all patients within 28 days. If direct access to diagnostic test results for patients was introduced, radiology reporting services would be stretched even further. The findings also reveal the lack of understanding among patients of the role radiologists play in their diagnosis and treatment plan.
Introduction

The RCR, in partnership with the Patients Association, carried out a survey (from end of October 2015–April 2016) primarily to:

- Investigate how long patients are waiting for the results from X-rays and scans such as CT and MRI
- Ask for patients’ views on UK Government proposals for patients to receive their results directly.

Survey respondents were informed that the survey was for patients who had undergone non-dental X-rays and scans in the UK within the two years prior to the survey date.

Method

The online survey ran for six months from 23 October 2015–22 April 2016. During this period, to increase the number of respondents, it was repeatedly promoted to the Patients Association’s e-Member database (which includes patients, staff and other supporters), Twitter followers and other members of the general public. The survey was also repeatedly promoted via the RCR’s Twitter feed, website and monthly news email. As the survey was publicly accessible, the promotion focused on asking that the link to the online survey be shared as widely as possible to encourage patient participation.

Respondents were informed that all information supplied would be held by the Patients Association and the RCR and would remain secure and confidential. A phone number for the Patients Association was given if patients had any queries about the survey.

Response rate

Data submissions were received up to 22 April 2016. Responses were received from 624 patients.
Most patients who responded said their X-ray or scan had been undertaken at a pre-booked hospital appointment (65.5%) arranged either by their GP or a hospital doctor (91.1%). The most frequent answer given for ‘somewhere else’ was specialist clinics. Other health professionals that patients said had arranged their diagnostic imaging included physiotherapists, midwives and senior nurses.
Less than half of patients surveyed thought a clinical radiologist was responsible for interpreting their X-ray or scan (48%). The rest thought it was their hospital consultant (35%) or GP (16%). This supports the RCR’s view that patients (and by extension the wider public) are not, on the whole, aware of radiologists and their role in patients’ ‘care pathways’.

85.3% of patients who responded stated they had waited less than four weeks to find out the results of their X-ray or scan. 14.7% (almost 1 in seven patients) waited more than one month.
Most patients had their X-ray or scan explained by a hospital doctor (41%) or GP (29%); 23% (just over 1 in 5 patients) said they didn’t receive any explanation at all.

Just over two-thirds of patients who responded did not see either a written report of their X-ray or scan result (67.4%) or the actual image(s) (66.8%).
The Government is thinking of introducing arrangements for patients to receive direct results of their X-rays and scans. Do you think this is a good idea?

If you received your results directly, how would you like to be given them?

Where respondents selected ‘Other’, they were asked to specify their preference. Most free text answers suggested a combination of methods, dependent on whether the results were serious:

‘The results are meaningless without discussion of the rest of the clinical picture with a health professional.’

‘I would like to receive a copy of my scan results during a face-to-face discussion with my GP or hospital specialist, using a lay person’s language.’

‘This depends on the outcome – if there was something serious showing I would want a face-to-face discussion with a doctor or specialist, otherwise by email.’
Discussion

The survey findings highlight the current lack of capacity in UK radiology services to deliver X-ray and scan results for all patients within 28 days.

Medical imaging is critical to modern medical diagnosis. Recent research shows imaging activity has been growing at nearly 6% per annum over the last ten years and that demand for CT and MRI scans is expected to grow at 9% per annum or more.¹

At the same time, the UK has one of the lowest numbers of radiologists per capita in Europe with 48 trained radiologists per million population in comparison to Germany (92), Spain (112) and France (130).² Furthermore, over 300 consultant radiologist posts remain vacant across the UK and a lack of funded training places is preventing the necessary workforce expansion.³

The impact of this combination of increasing demand and chronic shortage of diagnostic reporting capacity will ultimately be felt by patients.

Long waiting times for test results potentially mean delays in diagnosing cancer and other serious illnesses, increased anxiety for patients and their families and wasted journeys for patients who have booked follow-up appointments only to find their results are not ready.

The findings also show a great deal of support from patients to have direct access to reports of their imaging studies. This echoes findings from research conducted by Cancer Research UK and is line with the Government’s aim of shared decision-making.⁴ Ideally, the results would also be explained to patients in person by a health professional. This would require a change in approach by many clinicians given that the majority of those patients who responded to this survey did not see their imaging results and just over 20% were not provided with any explanation at all.

In addition, the findings reveal the lack of knowledge among patients about radiologists and their role in diagnosis and treatment. If patients are to share in decision-making about their treatment, they should fully understand the role radiologists play in their care pathway.
References

2. The Royal College of Radiologists. *Diagnostic radiology – our patients are still waiting* ...London: The Royal College of Radiologists, 2016.