

## **Clinical guidelines: physicians' attitudes and influence on clinical decision making**

Zimlichman E., Grauss D., Lahad A., Mandel D., Kreiss Y., Kochba I.

### **Objective:**

To measure the influence of clinical guidelines for external otitis on clinical practice and to evaluate physicians attitudes towards clinical guidelines.

### **Methods:**

In June 2002, the Medicine branch of the Israeli Medical Corps, issued a clinical guideline dealing with diagnosis and treatment of external otitis - a common health condition observed in primary care clinics. Among other information, the guideline made clear that treatment should be restricted to topical antibiotics, and that systemic antibiotic therapy should be avoided (a common recognized mistake).

We have used our computerized patient records database to retrospectively draw data from 65 primary care clinics and compare health data for a 3-month period before and following guidelines introduction (Jan-March of 2002 and Jan-March of 2003). Data collected was type of treatment, number of rest days prescribed, rate of further specialists' consultation and referral rates to the emergency room. In order to study physicians' attitudes towards the clinical guidelines, a telephone questionnaire dealing with attitudes towards guideline policy was delivered to 100 physicians working in the participating clinics.

### **Results:**

In the period of the study, 910 office visits of patients with external otitis were compared with 782 visits after the publication of the above mentioned guidelines. No significant change in referral rates to specialists or to the emergency room was recorded. However, a significant reduction of rest days prescribed was noted ( $p=0.006$ ), and on analyzing the treatment given by the physician for external otitis, we found a decrease of systemic antibiotics treatment ( $p=0.03$ ) with an increase in topical antibiotic treatment ( $p<0.001$ ).

Seventy five questionnaires were returned to be analyzed (75% compliance rate). While 96% of physicians stated that they receive and read the clinical guidelines, and 89% stated that these guidelines are available for them at the clinic, 44% stated that the implementation and dissemination techniques should be improved.

### **Conclusions:**

Clinical guidelines influenced clinical practice in primary care settings, and improved quality of care. Better implementation of the guidelines should further improve health performance and outcome. Health officials should not overlook the potential of clinical guidelines in improving quality of health, and should be aware of the importance of an adequate introduction program. Furthermore, we have found our computerized patient records to be a valuable tool in assessing the need and influence of policy changes made by health administrators in the Israeli Medical Corps.