

How doctor rivalry can help save lives of cancer patients

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Telling GPs that they are sending fewer patients for cancer tests than their colleagues can save lives by boosting referrals by up to 20 per cent, an NHS trial has found.

Sending letters to doctors with low rates of referral pointing out that others are doing better spurs them to improve, the study concluded. Health chiefs are considering whether to adopt the plan more widely after calculations that 2,500 cancers could be spotted a year earlier as a result.

Late diagnosis is thought to be one of the reasons why cancer survival in Britain is notably worse than in other rich countries. A report by Sir Mike Richards, the government's former cancer chief, concluded last year that one reason for late diagnosis was that GPs were sending too few patients for tests.

The study in Manchester involved

sending letters to 244 GP surgeries with below average referral rates. While the effect was limited among surgeries just below average, those in the bottom 30 per cent increased referrals by 20 per cent compared with similar surgeries not sent letters. Below-average prescribers increased referrals by 10 per cent overall.

Felicity Algate of the Behavioural Insights Team, a social-purpose company spun out of Whitehall, said that the idea came about after letters sent to GPs who prescribed large amounts of antibiotics led to the number of prescriptions falling by 3 per cent. "Just browbeating people or just giving information, that's not effective in changing behaviour [but] social norms are a very, very powerful factor," she said.

Ms Algate was surprised by the size of the effect, suggesting that it also involved professional competitiveness and reassurance that the surgeries were

not referring too many patients. "There are conflicting messages because there is quite strong pressure not to refer too many people," she said.

Jodie Moffat, of Cancer Research UK, said that the charity would look at the scheme in more detail, adding: "Building the evidence to understand how the NHS can improve urgent cancer referrals is really important."

However, Helen Stokes-Lampard, of the Royal College of GPs, said that putting GP surgeries under more pressure could "cause more harm than good".

She said that GPs were often berated for sending too many people to hospital, adding: "When some cancers are in the early stages they display similar symptoms to many much more common illnesses that must first be ruled out... The real problem lies with the lack of resources, including diagnostic tests in the community."

NHS England is studying the results.