

## National register will monitor hip replacements

Judy Jones *Malmesbury, Wiltshire*

A national register to monitor the long term performance of hip replacements in England is planned by the Department of Health to address widespread variations in the costs and effectiveness of such operations in the NHS.

The move comes in response to recommendations made this month in reports from the National Audit Office and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). The reports identified significant differences around the country in the quality of hip replacement services and in the type of prostheses used.

About 30 000 people a year have hips replaced on the NHS in England, at a cost of £140m (\$224m). Some 10% of these patients develop complications and may have to undergo repeat operations, the National Audit Office's investigation found. Higher failure rates are associated with revision surgery, which can be between two to three times as expensive as primary operations.

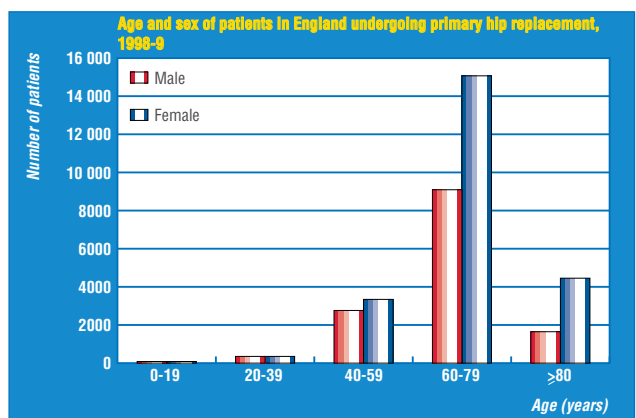
A primary total hip replacement costs anything between £384 and £7784, depending on the prosthesis used and the complexity of the procedure. The average cost is £3755. Most of the 60 or so different hip

prostheses on the market have not been properly evaluated, according to evidence published by the Department of Health four years ago.

A National Audit Office survey of 986 orthopaedic consultants in England found that 14% were using prostheses for which no evidence of effectiveness existed. In 1998-9 alone, 3400 patients received hip replacements of no proved value.

The survey also found that 27% of consultants did not always inform patients if they were implanting a type of prosthesis that they had not used before. Moreover, 13% of NHS trusts reported that commissions offered by manufacturers to "try out" specific prostheses were influential in the introduction of such new equipment.

Most hip replacements are carried out on patients aged 60-79. But the age and weight of patients considered acceptable for surgery also varied widely in the survey of consultants. A third of consultants said that they did not offer surgery to patients who they considered to be overweight. The weight above which some consultants ruled out operations ranged from 14 stone to 20 stone (89-127 kg).



Older women will be the largest group to benefit from a new register in England to monitor hip replacement operations

About 8% of consultants said that they might refuse operations on grounds of age, but it was generally agreed among these that an upper limit of 90-95 years was appropriate. Fewer than half the consultants surveyed said that they measured patient outcomes of hip replacement surgery, and of those that did so, only a minority measured outcomes on a continuing basis.

The report called for a national register to monitor the long term effectiveness of hip replacement surgery. It would extend the use of several local and regional computer databases (such as the Trent regional arthroplasty register) to cover the whole country. In Sweden, the use of a hip register has brought about a reduction in the range of different prostheses used from

240 to five principal models, a lower revision rate, and improvements in surgical technique.

John Hutton, minister of state for health, welcomed the report and accepted the recommendation for a national register: "We are in the process of drawing up proposals to establish such a system, and we will consult all those involved over the summer."

Earlier this month the National Institute for Clinical Excellence issued guidance to orthopaedic consultants that only artificial joints proved to last 10 years or more should be implanted in patients (15 April, p 1026). □

*Hip Replacements: Getting It Right First Time* can be accessed on the National Audit Office's website ([www.nao.gov.uk](http://www.nao.gov.uk)).

## Discrimination "rife" against mental health patients

Dolly Chadda *London*

Discrimination against people with mental health problems is rife and extends into the health professions, a survey published by the Mental Health Foundation reports this week.

About 70% of the 556 respondents reported discrimination in response to their own mental distress or that of a friend or relative. It was not just family and friends who were

unsympathetic and showed lack of understanding about mental illness but also GPs and other health service staff, the survey says.

The survey, published on 25 April to mark Mental Health Action Week, found that 44% of respondents felt discriminated against by GPs. The most common form of discrimination reported was that physical illness was not taken seriously or was attributed to mental distress or psychosomatic sources. One person reported when talking about a relative: "[the GP] misdiagnosed lung and liver cancer as confusion and schizophrenia."

This is a serious problem, the Mental Health Foundation said, because it has implications for

receiving appropriate health care.

Respondents reported that GPs told them everything from "snap out of it" to "I can only help you if you're suicidal." They also accused GPs of not always believing that they were suffering mental distress and of an overreliance on drugs for treatment.

Nevertheless, most people (84%) said that they could still sometimes tell their GP of their mental distress, possibly reflecting the fact that family doctors are the first port of call for psychological support.

Nurses—both in hospital and in the community—psychiatrists, consultants, accident and emergency staff, and social workers were also specifically reported as

being discriminatory towards mentally ill people. Nearly a third of respondents indicated that they had experienced discrimination from health professionals other than GPs.

The survey found widespread discrimination by family and friends as well as in the workplace and when seeking to gain employment.

Among the foundation's recommendations are ongoing training for GPs and other health staff to develop their understanding of mental health problems, as well as education targeted at schoolchildren, the general public, and the media. □

*Pull Yourself Together* is available from the Mental Health Foundation (tel 020 7535 7441), price £10.