TITLE: CMA Rheumatology Wait Time Benchmarks: The need to tame the queue across the continuum of care

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JW, LW, KT, LJ had full access to all data in the study and guarantees the integrity of the data and accuracy of the analyses. JW drafted the manuscript. All authors revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. All authors have contributed substantially to the design, analysis and interpretation, have approved the final version submitted for publication, and agreed to act as guarantor of the work.

Funding Statement:

This study was funded by an operating grant from the Canadian Initiative For Outcomes in Rheumatology Care (CIORA).

Manuscript Details:

Abstract word count: 244/250 Manuscript Word Count: 2480/2500 No. of Tables: 6 No. of Figures: 1 No. of References: 53

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Canadian Medical Association's Wait Times Alliance recently established wait time benchmarks for rheumatology consultations. Our aim was to quantify wait times to rheumatologist consultation, overall and for different diagnostic categories.

Methods: We identified patients with referrals to Ontario rheumatologists in the Electronic Medical Record Administrative data Linked Database (EMRALD). To assess the full patient care pathway, dates of symptom onset, presentation in primary care, and referral were identified from the primary care electronic medical records (EMRs). Dates of rheumatologist consultations were obtained by linking with physician service claims. The duration of each phase of the care pathway (symptom onset to primary care to referral to rheumatologist consultation) was determined and compared with established benchmarks.

Results: Among 2430 referrals from 168 family physicians, 83% of patients were seen by 146 rheumatologists. The main reasons for referral were arthritis (32%) and systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases (31%). Wait times varied by condition and region. Overall, the median time from referral to rheumatologist consultation was 74 days; 66 days for systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases. Wait time benchmarks were not achieved, even for the most urgent types of referrals. For systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases, most of the delays occurred prior to referral.

Interpretation: Rheumatology wait times exceeded established benchmarks. Targeted efforts are needed to promote more timely access to both primary care and rheumatology care. Routine linkage of EMR with administrative data may help fill important gaps in knowledge about waits to primary and specialty care.

INTRODUCTION

Timely access to primary care and specialists is a nation-wide concern. The Canadian Medical Association's (CMA) Wait Times Alliance has mobilized efforts to reduce the excessive wait times that Canadians experience by establishing comparable indicators and evidence-based benchmarks for medically acceptable wait times(1, 2). Recent efforts have called upon the need to address wait times to primary care(3) and non-surgical specialists(4). Unfortunately, there is no universal approach in Canada to systematically measure and monitor wait times from primary care referral to specialist consultation. Moreover, a truly patient-centered approach to wait times measurement must address the total wait faced by patients, including the time from symptom onset to see a primary care physician, the time for the primary care physician to request a referral, and then the wait to see a specialist.

Rheumatology wait time benchmarks have recently been established(4). Rheumatic diseases represent the second greatest cause of disability and the fourth greatest impact on the overall world population health (in terms of both death and disability)(5, 6). Given the growing burden and overall impact of rheumatic diseases (7-9), providing these patients with timely access to healthcare remains a pan-Canadian challenge that will only intensify over time.

Primary care physicians play an essential role in coordinating care with rheumatologists to effectively diagnose, manage and treat patients with rheumatic diseases. Optimal care for rheumatic diseases hinges on early access to rheumatologists but there are many hurdles that can impede optimal care, such as delays in patient presentation and physician referrals (10). Although evidence for the benefits of early detection and treatment for improving patient outcomes has been well demonstrated in inflammatory arthritis (11-24), benchmarks for other rheumatic diseases have not yet been established - Box 1(4).

Reports on rheumatology wait times have arisen primarily from urban centres that do not

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reflect the geographic realities of Canada (25-27). Previous studies quantifying delays to rheumatology care have also predominately focused on rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients from rheumatology clinics and thus restrict analyses to only a subset of rheumatology referrals and those who successfully accessed specialists (25, 28-30). In light of this evidence gap, and the lack of systemic measurements to inform wait times across the continuum of care for patients with rheumatic diseases, we employed a novel approach to linking primary care electronic medical records (EMRs) with administrative health data to quantify delays to rheumatology care – overall, and for different diagnostic categories – for each component of the care pathway.

Box 1. Wait time benchmarks

Recommended maximum wait time from referral to rheumatologist consultation(4, 31)							
Rheumatoid arthritis ; other inflammatory arthritis	FOUR WEEKS						
Psoriatic arthritis	SIX WEEKS						
Spondyloarthritis	THREE MONTHS						
Systemic lupus erythematosus	FOUR WEEKS						

METHODS

Study Design. We conducted an observational study involving EMRs from primary care physicians (to provide accurate dates of when referrals were requested) linked with health administrative data (to provide accurate dates of encounters with rheumatologists).

Data Sources. We used the Electronic Medical Record Administrative data Linked Database (EMRALD), comprised of electronic clinical practice data from primary care physicians throughout Ontario(32). Information includes patient and provider demographics and all electronic data captured during primary care visits, current and past medical histories, laboratory test results, prescriptions, referral letters, and diagnostic tests, as well as information related to care received elsewhere and reported to the practice.

EMRALD participants are also linked to the following administrative datasets. The OntarioHealth Insurance Plan (OHIP) Corporate Provider Database (CPDB) is used to determineVersion 1.02015-10-154

physician demographics, training and practice location, defined using the Ontario Medical Association's Rurality Index of Ontario(33). Physician group affiliations were identified in the Client Agency Program Enrolment (CAPE) database of patient enrollments with primary care groups.

Patient demographics including age, sex, patient residence and regional health service planning areas (Local Health Integration Networks, LHIN) were determined from the OHIP Registered Persons Database (RPDB). Encounters with rheumatologists were identified using the OHIP Claims History Database, with rheumatology specialty defined using the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) Physician Database (IPDB).

These datasets are linked using unique, encoded patient and physician identifiers and are securely held and analyzed at ICES (www.ices.on.ca).

Participants. At the time of the study, 168 primary care physicians were included from across Ontario. From 268,854 patients with valid health insurance numbers, we identified 2,925 patients who had at least one electronic referral letter to a rheumatologist within the EMR from 2000 to 2013. Administrative data were obtained for these patients up until October 31, 2014. In an effort to study first time referrals to rheumatology, we excluded patients with 're-referrals' (occurring if the first referral occurred before the EMR start date), second opinions, miscoded rheumatology referral letters, or missing or invalid referral dates.

Data abstraction. Using a standardized data abstraction tool, the entire patient EMR was reviewed to categorize each patient according to their diagnosis or clinical impression, identify dates of symptom onset and the first encounter to the primary care physician related to the complaint. Patients were categorized into five diagnostic categories: mechanical/degenerative arthritis (e.g., osteoarthritis, OA), systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases, regional

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musculoskeletal syndromes (e.g., tendonitis), chronic pain conditions (e.g., fibromyalgia), osteoporosis/osteopenia, and other (e.g., abnormal tests). Systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases were further categorized into mutually exclusive categories: rheumatoid arthritis (RA), other inflammatory arthritis (e.g., seronegative, undifferentiated, palindromic rheumatism), gout and other crystal arthropathies (e.g., pseudo-gout, calcium pyrophosphate deposition), psoriatic arthritis, other spondyloarthropathies (e.g., ankylosing spondylitis, reactive, enteropathic), polymyalgia rheumatica, vasculitis, and other systemic autoimmune rheumatic diseases (e.g., systemic lupus, scleroderma, Sjogren's, dermato/poly-myositis, Raynaud's). When multiple conditions co-existed, the patient was assigned to the most serious complaint requiring consultation (e.g., a patient with pre-existing OA and acute onset inflammatory arthritis was categorized into the latter category). When there was discordance between physicians, the diagnosis was categorized according to the rheumatologist's impression (based on rheumatology consultation letters received post-referral).

Analysis. To determine generalizability of our results, we assessed the characteristics of EMRALD study physicians in comparison to all Ontario primary care physicians. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the study population according to reason for referral. The wait time was determined overall and for each diagnostic category for each component of the care pathway: 1) symptom onset until the date of the first primary care visit related to the complaint; 2) first primary care visit related to the complaint until the date of referral to a rheumatologist; and 3) date the referral was sent to the date of the first rheumatologist visit. Patients were followed for at least 365 days from the date of the referral to identify the date of the first rheumatologist visit subsequent to the referral date recorded in the EMR. Wait times were compared with the established target wait times to determine the percentage of patients seen by a

RESULTS

rheumatologist within each time frame. Actual wait-times (in days), including medians (interquartile ranges, IQR), means (standard deviations, SD), and 50th and 90th percentiles were estimated. Wait times from symptom onset were estimated for patients with systemic inflammatory conditions for whom symptom onset dates could be determined. Regional wait times according to the patient's residence were also evaluated.

Analyses were performed on coded data using SAS version 9.2 and Microsoft SQL Server 2012. Ethics approval was obtained from the institutional review board at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Ontario.

EMRALD physicians (representing 32 rural, 39 suburban, and 97 urban practices) were slightly younger, with more females and rural representation, in comparison to all Ontario primary care physicians (Table 1).

After screening 2925 patients to identify first time referrals, 2430 (83%) patients were retained for analyses (Figure 1). Overall, 2417 (99.5%) referrals occurred between 2005 and 2013 corresponding to the average duration of EMR use.

Among 2430 patients referred to rheumatologists, 69% were female and the mean (SD) age at time of referral was 53 (16) years (Table 2). The most frequent referrals included mechanical/degenerative arthritis (N=787; 32%) and systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases (N=745; 31%). The breakdown of systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases were RA (16%), other inflammatory arthritis (22%), other systemic autoimmune rheumatic diseases (18%), crystal arthropathies (16%), spondylitis/spondyloarthropathies (10%), psoriatic arthritis (6%), polymyalgia rheumatica (9%), and vasculitis (3%), Table 2, Figure 1.

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In total, 68 (3%) patients had documentation of declining or missing the initial rheumatology consultation after the referral letter was sent (Table 3). Of these 68 patients, 35% subsequently saw a rheumatologist. Similarly, 87 (4%) referrals were declined by the first rheumatologist approached to assess the patient. The majority of declined referrals were for non-systemic inflammatory conditions. The most common reason for refusal was that the rheumatologist only assessed patients with certain conditions (Table 3). Of these 87 patients, 59% subsequently saw another rheumatologist.

According to administrative data, 2015 (83%) patients were seen by 146 distinct rheumatologists within 365 days of referral, and 58% of patients were seen within three months of referral. Wait times varied by condition (Table 4). The median (IQR) time from referral to rheumatologist was 74 (27-101) days among all patients and 66 (18-84) days among patients with systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases.

For systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases, 33% were seen within four weeks of referral (Table 4). Comparing to established CMA wait time benchmarks (target being 100%), 38% of RA patients were seen within four weeks of the date of referral (35% for other inflammatory arthritis), 63% of spondyloarthritis patients were seen within three months; and 34% of psoriatic arthritis patients were seen within six weeks. For RA patients, the median time to be seen by rheumatologists from symptom onset and date of referral was 327 and 66 days, respectively (Table 4-5). Wait times from symptom onset to rheumatologist also varied amongst different types of systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases (Table 5). The total delay was longest for patients with crystal arthropathies and spondylitis.

Geographic variations in wait times were observed (Table 6). The longest wait times consistently occurred in the South West LHIN and the Champlain LHIN, where median waits

from referral to rheumatology consultation were 2-3 times those in the Central East LHIN.

Interpretation

Using EMRs from a representative sample of primary care practices revealed exceedingly long wait times to see rheumatologists. Established wait time benchmarks were not achieved for even the most urgent types of referrals (i.e. inflammatory arthritis including RA). Close to one in three referrals were for systemic inflammatory conditions and these were seen earlier compared to other types of referrals. However, most of the delay for these urgent conditions occurred prior to referral, representing delays in patients seeking medical attention and family doctors waiting too long to refer patients who require earlier access.

Previous Canadian reports among RA patients seen in urban settings estimated shorter wait times than our study: three to six months wait from symptom onset to referral and then approximately one month from referral to see a rheumatologist(25-27, 29, 30). Our findings confirm that wait times in certain urban areas, such as Toronto, are shorter than elsewhere in the province. There is also ample evidence from international studies that support our findings that the majority of the delay occurs prior to referral (34-38). This suggests delays attributed to the awareness and care-seeking behavior of patients, as well as opportunities to improve screening in primary care.

Wait time measurement plays an important part in driving quality improvement and accountability. The CMA economic wait times report identified the wait time costs for joint replacement surgery to be significantly higher than for other priority areas(39). Yet, the costs of the 'excess wait' ignored the total costs endured by patients in getting to see the specialist or even in getting to see their family doctor. As the decision-making and timing for orthopedic

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surgery is often established by an interdisciplinary team of rheumatologists and orthopedic surgeons, our findings contribute novel data on the excessive wait times patients endure across the entire patient care pathway. Reducing wait times to rheumatologists for appropriate care management may ultimately reduce the need for joint replacement surgery (40, 41).

In Canada, both rheumatologists and primary care physicians identify long wait times as a barrier to providing adequate care (42-44), and waits to see rheumatologists are longer than for most other medical subspecialties(45). We believe our findings represent a call to action on the need for increasing awareness amongst patients, physicians and policy-makers of the major burden that rheumatic diseases places on individuals, society and healthcare systems and to prioritize planning of healthcare services, medical education (46, 47), and research (9). The relative shortage of rheumatologists(48-50) especially in rural areas and the projected increasing burden of rheumatic diseases (5, 8) suggests a need for innovative models of care (51, 52). Rheumatology referrals are often not done in a standardized or consistent way and wait times vary by individual rheumatologist. Primary care physicians may refer patients to the rheumatologist they know the best, (53) unaware of the shorter wait times of other rheumatologists. This suggests a need for better ways to systematically track and report waits at the level of specialists. Finally, given the substantial delay in patients seeking medical attention and the delay of primary care physicians requesting referrals, increasing patient awareness and medical education are acutely needed.

While our study is the largest and most detailed to document the experience of Canadians with rheumatic diseases waiting to access primary and rheumatology care, several limitations warrant discussion. The retrospective nature of the data meant that we were reliant upon accurate clinical documentation. This raises the possibility of misclassification between diagnostic

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categories. Since patients with more classic disease presentation or more active disease may be more correctly diagnosed, and wait times may be different for such patients, such misclassification could introduce bias. Furthermore, dates of symptom onset may be inaccurately documented, and we were unable to estimate symptom onset for chronic complaints. However, dates of symptom onset for systemic inflammatory conditions with acute onset are less likely to be affected by recall bias. Finally, wait times are likely to differ across provinces. Our regional variations within province did not appear to correlate well with regional rheumatology supply (Table 6) as patients may seek care outside of their health-planning region or there may be different thresholds for referral by region. For example, the delay from symptom onset to rheumatologist was much longer for RA in the North East (data not shown) yet the wait from referral to rheumatologist was shorter compared to other regions, which may reflect referrals being requested when physicians are aware of locum rheumatologists visiting the area. Despite these limitations, we present a unique approach to monitoring wait times for specialist care in the absence of a national wait time reporting system.

In conclusion, wait times to rheumatologists exceeded established benchmarks and improving access is urgently required. For systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases, most of the delay occurs prior to referral, where targeted efforts are needed to promote more timely consultations. As Canadian administrative data currently cannot be used to monitor wait times to specialists, approaches to linking EMR and administrative data are worth exploring.

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Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, we wish to thank all the primary physicians who provide data to EMRALD. We would like to thank our chart abstractors for their work: Monique Kerr-Taylor, Adenieki Mornan, and Anne Marie Moir.

This study was funded by an operating grant from the Canadian Initiative For Outcomes in Rheumatology Care (CIORA) and supported by the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES), which is funded by an annual grant from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC). The opinions, results and conclusions reported in this paper are those of the authors and are independent from the funding sources. No endorsement by ICES or the Ontario MOHLTC is intended or should be inferred.

JW holds Fellowship Awards from The Arthritis Society and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Banting; and is supported by the CAnadian Network for Advanced Interdisciplinary Methods (CAN-AIM) for comparative effectiveness research team funded by the CIHR Drug Safety and Effectiveness Network (DSEN). SB holds a career award from the Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec. CB holds a Canada Research Chair in Knowledge Transfer for Musculoskeletal Care and a Pfizer Research Chair in Rheumatology. NI is supported by New Investigator Awards from the CIHR and the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto. KT, RLJ, and DB are supported by Investigator Awards from the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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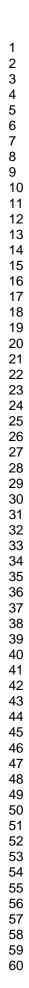
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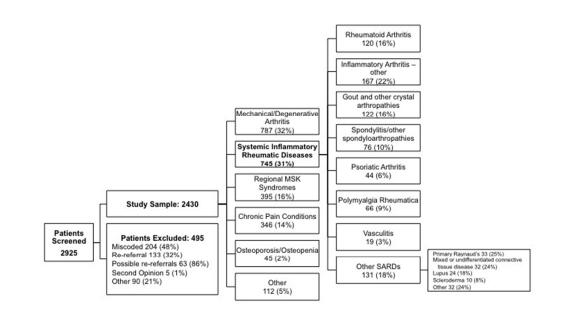
Characteristic		EMRALD P N=10	•	All Prima Physici Onta N=8	ians in trio ¹
		Ν	%	N	%
Sex					
	Female	94	56.0	3333	41.4
	Male	74	44.0	4721	58.7
Age group					
	Under 35 years	25	14.9	500	6.2
	35-44 years	57	33.9	1643	20.4
	45-54 years	36	21.4	2425	30.1
	55-79 years	46	27.4	3471	43.1
	Unknown	4	2.4	15	0.2
Medical training location					
	Canada	150	89.3	5967	74.1
	International	17	10.1	2074	25.8
	Unknown	1	0.6	13	0.2
Practice Location					
	Rural	32	19.1	631	7.6
	Suburban	39	23.2	1355	16.3
	Urban	97	57.7	6325	76.1
Group Model ²					
	FHG or FHN	18	10.7	2795	34.7
	FHO	136	81.0	3525	43.8
	Other/Unknown	14	8.3	1734	21.5
		Mean	Range	Mean	Rang
Physician Age		46.6	28-69	52.2	27-7
Years in practice		15.2	1-36	18.5	0-45
Years since graduation		19.9	3-43	26.3	2-65

Table 1. Comparison of EMRALD study physicians and all primary care physicians in Ontario as of March 31, 2014

¹ Primary care physicians were defined as having a main specialty of general physician/family physician or Community Medicine/Public Health who's practice is focused on primary care;

² Abbreviations: Family Health Groups (FHG); Family Health Networks (FHN); Family Health Organizations (FHO)





Study flow diagram of sample selection and classification of referrals 254x142mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Table 2. Patient Characteristics at time of referral

	No. of	Age,	Female,
	Patients	Mean (SD)	n (%)
All Patients	2430	53.0 (16.3)	1682 (69.2)
Arthritis	787	56.4 (15.6)	554 (70.4)
Systemic Inflammatory Rheumatic Diseases	745	53.4 (17.0)	427 (57.3)
Rheumatoid Arthritis	120	55.4 (15.8)	84 (70.0)
Inflammatory Arthritis – other	167	50.9 (16.2)	95 (56.9)
Crystal Arthropathy	122	61.3 (15.3)	33 (27.0)
Spondylitis/Spondyloarthropathy	76	41.5 (15.2)	31 (40.8)
Psoriatic Arthritis	44	52.9 (12.6)	26 (59.1)
Polymyalgia Rheumatica	66	71.2 (9.2)	41 (62.1)
Vasculitis	19	52.7 (23.5)	10 (52.6)
Other systemic autoimmune rheumatic diseases	131	45.3 (13.9)	107 (81.7)
Regional Musculoskeletal (MSK) Syndromes	395	52.2 (15.8)	286 (72.4)
Chronic Pain Conditions	346	46.5 (14.3)	298 (86.1)
Osteoporosis	45	62.3 (15.2)	38 (84.4)
Other	112	46.3 (16.3)	79 (70.5)

Table 3. Main Reasons for declined referrals

	All Patients $n(9/2)$
Patient declined or missed consultation after first referral sent	<u>n (%)</u> 68 (2.8)
Main Reasons:	08 (2.8)
Symptoms resolved	6 (8.8)
Patient choice	21 (30.9)
Patient unavailable/missed appointment	26 (38.2)
Rheumatologist declined consultation after first referral sent	87 (3.4)
Main Reasons:	
Only consults for certain conditions	23 (26.4)
Rheumatologist suggested an alternate plan (e.g. pain clinic, another specialist)	21 (24.1)
No reason provided	19 (21.8)
Not accepting new patients	10 (11.5)

	No. of	No. of Proportion of Patients seen by a rheumatologist within					within	Wait ti	ime (days)	Percenti	ile ¹ (days)
	Patients	4	6	3	6	9	12	Mean	Median	50th	90 th
		Weeks	Weeks	Months	Months	Months	Months	(SD)	(IQR)	50	70
All Patients	2430	23.8	34.8	58.2	75.7	80.8	82.9	76 (69)	74 (27-101)	57	170
Arthritis	787	21.4	31.6	57.7	76.4	81.3	84.0	80 (70)	73 (30-103)	62	174
Systemic Inflammatory Rheumatic Diseases	745	32.5	44.7	66.6	80.1	84.4	86.3	64 (66)	66 (18-84)	43	155
Rheumatoid Arthritis	120	38.3*	47.5	70.8	79.1	84.2	86.7	63 (71)	66 (15-81)	37	166
Inflammatory Arthritis: other	167	35.3*	50.9	70.1	79.6	83.2	85.6	59 (67)	55 (17-71)	38	128
Crystal Arthropathy	122	27.1	41.8	63.9	82.8	87.7	88.5	70 (61)	69 (24-93)	52	156
Spondylitis/ Spondyloarthropathy	76	22.4	31.6	63.2*	82.9	85.5	85.5	68 (50)	62 (29-91)	58	146
Psoriatic Arthritis	44	25.0	34.1*	59.1	86.4	95.5	97.7	85 (75)	88 (30-117)	56	189
Polymyalgia Rheumatica	66	47.0	54.6	71.2	81.8	86.4	87.8	52 (61)	53 (11-64)	27	131
Vasculitis	19	52.6	63.2	73.7	73.7	79.0	79.0	35 (51)	28 (11-39)	16	71
Other systemic rheumatic diseases	131	26.7	40.5	61.8	75.6	78.6	81.7	68 (72)	62 (22-83)	46	137
Regional MSK Syndromes	395	25.1	36.7	60.8	77.7	81.8	83.5	70 (64)	68 (26-94)	53	152
Chronic Pain Conditions	346	14.7	25.4	46.5	68.2	76.0	78.3	92 (75)	90 (35-125)	72	204
Osteoporosis	45	7.0	9.0	20.0	53.0	62.0	62.0	115 (62)	82 (74-156)	118	183
Other	112	14.0	24.0	48.0	66.0	71.0	73.0	86 (68)	69 (40-110)	69	175

	Rheumatoid Arthritis	Inflammatory Arthritis-other	Crystal Arthropathy	Spondylitis	Psoriatic Arthritis	Polymyalgia Rheumatica	Vasculitis	Other systemic rheumatic diseases
Median (IQR), days								
Symptom onset to	173	102	188	716	228	63	128	208
primary care visit ¹	(16-189)	(10-112)	(4-192)	(14-730)	(17-245)	(14-77)	(3-131)	(14-222)
Primary care visit	115	125	353	173	513	123	73	181
to referral ²	(14-128)	(11-136)	(20-373)	(7-181)	(15-528)	(15-138)	(7-80)	(7-188)
Symptom onset to	326	259	1326	1342	627	238	293	855
Referral ²	(49-375)	(41-300)	(48-1374)	(63-1405)	(90-7167)	(55-293)	(33-325)	(44-899)
Referral to	66	55	69	62	88	53	28	62
Rheumatologist ³	(15-81)	(17-71)	(24-93)	(29-91)	(30-117)	(11-64)	(11-39)	(22-83)
Symptom onset to	327	260	1312	1262	680	240	608	940
Rheumatologist	(83-410)	(91-350)	(111-1423)	(112-1374)	(125-805)	(81-321)	(59-667)	(113-1053
Proportion of Patients by rheumatologists wit								
3 months from symptom onset	24%	21%	16%	14%	-	28%	28%	17%
6 months from symptom onset	42%	46%	35%	34%	34%	53%	39%	30%
9 months from symptom onset	50%	59%	45%	39%	43%	63%	44%	42%
12 months from symptom onset	59%	66%	47%	41%	49%	72%	56%	47%

Table 5. Total delay from symptom onset to rheumatologist consultation for systemic inflammatory rheumatic diseases

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LHIN	LHIN NAME	Ν	%	Median (IQR)	No. of rheumatologists 2009/10	No. of rheumatologists per 100,000
1	Erie St Clair	<5	-	-	<5	0.7
2	South West	182	7.5	146.5 (34.3-180.8)	9	1.1
3	Waterloo Wellington	405	16.7	77.5 (28.0-105.5)	<5	0.5
4	Hamilton Niagara	67	2.8	71.2 (24.3-95.5)	19	1.6
5	Central West	90	3.7	103.0 (41.0-144.0)	5	0.8
6	Mississauga Halton	29	1.2	65.0 (17.0-82.0)	11	1.2
7	Toronto Central	509	20.9	59.0 (15.0-74.0)	50	5.2
8	Central	365	15.0	72.3 (27.0-99.3)	18	1.3
9	Central East	184	7.6	46.3 (32.0-78.3)	12	0.9
10	South East	13	0.5	125.2 (30.8-156.0)	6	1.4
11	Champlain	166	6.8	112.2 (49.8-162.0)	19	1.8
12	North Simcoe Muskoka	224	9.2	77.5 (25.5-103.0)	<5	0.8
13	North East	190	7.8	55.0 (37.0-92.0)	<5	0.2
14	North West	0	-		<5	1.0
	Unknown	5	0.2	31.5 (43.75-75.25)		
	All Ontario	2430		74.0 (27.0-101.0)	162	1.5

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