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PROTOCOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CORE OUTCOME SET FOR CAUDA EQUINA SYNDROME: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS, DELPHI SURVEY AND CONSENSUS MEETING

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3 **PROTOCOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CORE OUTCOME SET FOR CAUDA EQUINA**
4 **SYNDROME: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS, DELPHI**
5 **SURVEY AND CONSENSUS MEETING**
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38 **Keywords**

39 Cauda Equina Syndrome, Surgery, Outcomes, Core Outcome Set, Systematic Literature
40 Review, Qualitative Interviews, Delphi Survey, Consensus Meeting
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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES) is a serious neurological condition most likely due to compression of the lumbosacral nerve roots. It can result in significant disability in young adults. The evidence is mainly from retrospective studies and there is heterogeneity in the outcomes chosen. We intend to develop a core outcome set for patients with CES. This would be the minimum set of outcomes related to all research studies in CES. It will be decided via a transparent methodology involving key stakeholders.

Methods and Analysis

A systematic literature review and qualitative patient interviews will form a long list of outcomes. This would include all the outcomes mentioned in the literature and by the patients. The qualitative interviews will be semi structured, audio recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed with the use of NVivo version 10 to determine major themes and the outcomes described by CES patients. The next step would be to prioritise the long list of outcomes to determine which were the most important to CES patients and healthcare professionals who manage CES patients. This would be done through a two-round iterative Delphi survey and consensus meeting to decide the core outcome set for patients who have CES.

Ethics and Dissemination

The study has ethical approval. The final core outcome set will be published and freely available through the CES patient charity websites.

Registration Details

This study is registered with the Core Outcome Measures in Effectiveness Trials (COMET) database as study 824.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

- Main Strength is that this study is a transparent consensus process which involves key stakeholders (patients and healthcare professionals) to decide a core outcome set for CES.
- Systematic Literature review and qualitative interviews will produce an initial list of outcomes reported by the existing studies and patients. The International Delphi and consensus meeting will prioritise these outcomes to decide the core outcome set.
- The study results rely on the assumption that stakeholders will eventually come to a consensus.
- “What” outcomes to be measured will be decided but further work is required to recommend “how” these outcomes can be measured.

INTRODUCTION

Cauda equina syndrome (CES) is most likely due to compression of the lumbosacral nerve roots beneath the conus medullaris resulting in sensory-motor symptomatology of the lower limbs and sphincters clinically diagnosed as CES. Symptoms and signs include low back pain, unilateral or bilateral sciatica, saddle anaesthesia and motor weakness of the lower extremities with bladder and bowel dysfunction (1,2).

It is documented in the literature that timely operative decompression for CES secondary to herniated lumbar disc can lead to improved outcomes in patients (3,4,5). It is the most common emergency spine operation performed. In fact, delay or missed diagnosis of this condition incurs heavy litigation costs to the NHS at £336,000 (US \$549,427) per case on average (6) as reported to the Medical Defence Union in the UK. Although a rare condition in the population mainly occurring in adults the National Spinal Task Force showed that there are roughly 1000 operations done each year for CES in the UK so it is not a rare procedure and the economic burden of severe disability is a worrying unknown for both patient quality of life and development of appropriate health services.

Rationale for development of COS

Through scoping searches, it was identified that there are no randomised controlled trials in

1
2
3 this condition, many retrospective observational studies and few prospective studies for the
4 clinical outcome of patients who have CES. Most patients have had spinal surgery for CES.
5
6 There is heterogeneity and inconsistency between studies in outcome reporting. The
7
8 outcomes reported in the literature have not been independently validated as important to
9
10 key stakeholders.

11
12 There is no defined core outcome set in CES currently and we intend to develop this core
13
14 outcome set for use in CES research studies. A core outcome set defines the minimum
15
16 outcomes that should be consistently measured and reported in clinical trials in a specific
17
18 area of healthcare (7). With this there will be greater reporting consistency and a reduction
19
20 in outcome reporting bias in healthcare studies contributing to systematic reviews and
21
22 meta-analysis (8) that can lead to informed healthcare decisions.

23
24 This will be done through a systematic literature review and qualitative patient interviews to
25
26 develop a long list of outcomes. These outcomes are then prioritised through two rounds of
27
28 a Delphi process with key stakeholders and a consensus meeting to decide the core
29
30 outcome set. This would be published and used for future research studies and improving
31
32 outcome reporting in CES.

33
34 This has been done successfully in rheumatology with the OMERACT group (Outcomes
35
36 Measures in Rheumatoid Arthritis Clinical Trials). This international collaboration was
37
38 developed in the early 1990s involving patients in the development of core outcome sets
39
40 and has improved consistency of reported trials in this speciality (8,9)

41
42 <http://www.omeract.org>. The Core Outcome Measures in Effectiveness Trials (COMET)
43
44 initiative advocates the involvement of patients and currently holds a database of on-going
45
46 core outcome set developers (<http://www.comet-initiative.org>) to minimise duplication and
47
48 foster health service user engagement (7,10).

49 50 **Scope of the COS**

51
52 We aim to identify “what” outcomes are of concern to key stakeholders using transparent
53
54 methodology. We are not intending to consider how these outcomes should be measured.
55
56 The 11 minimum Core Outcome Set Standards for Development (COS-STAD)
57
58 recommendations are addressed in this protocol (11) (**Table 1**).

Table 1. COS-STAD recommendations

Domain	Standard Number	Methodology	Notes
Scope Specification	1	The research or practice setting in which the COS is to be applied	Research studies that will inform clinical decision making
	2	The health condition(s) covered by the COS	All severities of Cauda Equina Syndrome
	3	The population(s) covered by the COS	Human adults aged 18 or above
	4	The intervention(s) covered by the COS	Decompressive spinal surgery and medical management
Stakeholders involved	5	Those who will use the COS in research	Clinical trialists in CES are healthcare professionals who manage CES patients. They are included in standard 6.
	6	Healthcare professionals with experience of patients with the condition	This will include clinicians, experts and healthcare professionals involved in CES management
	7	Patients with the condition or their representatives	Patients who have had an operation for CES will be included ¹²
Consensus Process	8	The initial list of outcomes considered both healthcare professionals and patients views	Systematic Literature review ¹³ considered healthcare professional views. Qualitative interviews considered patient views.
	9	A scoring process and consensus definition were described a priori	Described in "Scoring" and "Analysis" section of this protocol
	10	Criteria for including/dropping/adding outcomes were described a priori	Described in "Analysis" section of this protocol
	11	Care was taken to avoid ambiguity of language used in the list of outcomes	Plain language and clinical explanations available. These will be pilot tested with patients and healthcare professionals.

Registration

The study is registered on the COMET database as study 824 (<http://www.comet-initiative.org/studies/details/824?result=true>).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Development of the core outcome set will be developed in the following phases:

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

Phase 3: Delphi Survey

Phase 4: Consensus Meeting

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

Research Question

What outcomes are reported in the medical literature after surgery for CES?

Method

The aim of the systematic literature review is to summarise the reporting standards of clinical outcomes following surgery in CES patients using the PRISMA guidelines (14). Most patients who have CES will undergo an operation. It summarised a list of outcomes that had been mentioned in the literature and categorised them into a known taxonomy (15). Full details including search strategy, study selection criteria and results of the systematic literature review have been published (13).

Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

Research Question

What outcomes have patients experienced after having surgery for CES and how do they feel about the management before and after surgery?

Method

The objectives of the qualitative interviews with CES patients are:

- To explore the patient experience of living with CES
- To ascertain what the patient feels are the most important outcomes that they are experiencing
- To ascertain what outcomes the patient feels are the most important to research in to improve CES management and aftercare
- To determine who should be key stakeholders
- Identify appropriate language to use for patient Delphi iterative process (16).

These interviews will be documented with audio recorded transcripts. The list of all potential outcomes from the systematic review and qualitative interviews will be placed into outcome domains by the research team to avoid repetition by qualitative method of content analysis (17). The qualitative interviews will be piloted with 2 CES patients to establish if the interview structure and technique is clear, understandable, and capable of answering the research questions. This would recognise any corrections that need to be made to interview structure or technique. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in

Table 2.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion criteria for qualitative interviews

INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
Adult patients	Adults unable to consent for research
Diagnosis of Cauda Equina Syndrome	
Patient underwent surgical procedure	
Less than 10 years since surgical procedure	
Ability to converse in English and to consent for research	

Participant Selection

Adult patients will be selected from those coded as having a diagnosis of cauda equina syndrome in the medical records. There is an existing database of cauda equina patients who have been operated on and followed up by consultants, registrars or nurse specialists. There is no discrimination leading to a patient going to one clinic or the other; it is done by

next available clinic. Adult patients would be 18 or older. They will have undergone spinal surgery to remove the compressive lesion at a single tertiary NHS institution over the past 10 years. This will capture short term and long term outcomes that are deemed important to them. Time to recording outcome will be taken since initial operation for CES.

Stratified purposive sampling (18) was chosen in which the aim is to select groups that display variation in some particular phenomena but each of which is fairly homogenous so the subgroups can be compared. Characteristics known to have an impact on the outcomes being investigated have been identified through scoping searches- severity of CES (CESI and CESR) (19) then there is a subgroup about which little is known and whose circumstances and views need to be explored; short (<2 years) or long term (>2 years and <10 years) since the operation (see **Table 3**). This will produce 4 subcategories to populate. This is to prevent potential bias you may get from having many patients who presented with a severe clinical picture and poor outcomes being more forthcoming and vocal. All subcategories for the sampling frame were deemed a priority and “nesting” of male and female was done within the subcategory. Half would ideally be male and half would be female.

Table 3. Sampling frame with suggested quotas

	CESI (Cauda Equina Syndrome Incomplete)	CESR (Cauda Equina Syndrome with retention)
Short term <2 yrs since operation	8-10 participants	8-10 participants
Long term >2 yrs <10 yrs since operation	10-12 participants	10-12 participants

We already have an existing database of 200 patients, which will be updated up to current date with contact details and clinical details of presentation and management. This should produce 50 patients per category. Due to reasons such as patients who have died, long travel distance from institution, not interested in participating it is anticipated that up to 10 patients may reply from each category, which would produce up to 40 patients in total. Options will be given to be interviewed at home, via electronic media (Skype), over the phone or to attend the hospital in person. All patients who consented will be interviewed

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3 until “data saturation” is reached and the research team will decide this collectively. Data
4 saturation is the point where increasing the sample size no longer contributes to new
5 evidence (20) and even large qualitative studies do not interview more than 50 people (21).
6
7 Sticking rigidly to a sample frame could be counter-intuitive as one patient can be data rich
8 during the interview as opposed to interviewing 5 patients where data is not rich. The aim is
9 to collect rich data to allow in depth analysis (20). So, although the sampling frame may
10 serve as a guide we will not use it to start restricting participants especially at the initial
11 stages of doing the qualitative interviews until data saturation is achieved.
12
13 An information leaflet would be sent to participants with a consent form. I would give them
14 3 weeks to “opt-out” of the study by returning a response slip. After this the participants
15 will receive a phone call to confirm interest for partaking in the study, to answer any further
16 questions and to arrange a time and location for the interview.
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25 **Interview Format and Analysis**

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27 A semi-structured interview format will be utilised as per our topic guide (**Supplementary**
28 **file 1**). Informed consent will be obtained prior to interview where anonymity and
29 confidentiality will be expressed. Open-ended non-leading questions on their diagnosis,
30 management post operatively and in the community will be asked allowing the participant
31 to recount their experiences without unnecessary interruption (21). Discussion will be
32 directed towards outcomes of importance to the patient as seen in the topic guide.
33
34 Interviewer will not divulge personal information about themselves and if any of these
35 questions are asked they can be answered at the end of the interview session. Reflexivity is
36 an important concept during qualitative research for striving towards objectivity and
37 neutrality (20) and analysis of the interviews will consider if bias from the interviewer’s own
38 beliefs may have crept in. It is anticipated that the interview will last for 45mins to an hour
39 at each sitting to prevent participant feeling pressurised. The same interviewer (NS) would
40 be used throughout. All interviewees will be made aware that the interviewer is a doctor
41 not involved in their on-going care. A sample of these transcripts will be reviewed by a
42 supervisor not involved in the qualitative interviews to confirm that they had been
43 undertaken in a satisfactory manner. Initially transcripts will be reviewed to start identifying
44 which outcomes are important to the patients by labelling and tagging the data. We will use
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3 descriptive analysis to detect, categorize, and classify the transcripts using NVivo qualitative
4 data analysis software version 10. Thematic charting will allow summarisation of the key
5 outcomes of each individual transcript and overall themes whilst retaining the context and
6 language in which it was expressed (20). The qualitative interviews will be reported as
7 outlined by the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ); a 32 item
8 checklist (22).
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13 14 15 ***Phase 3: The Delphi Survey***

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18 The outcomes from the systematic literature review and qualitative interviews will create a
19 long list. This will be condensed by grouping similar outcomes into domains and conforming
20 with the taxonomy used in the systematic literature review (13¹⁵). This will be reviewed and
21 agreed by the study team and pilot tested with the key stakeholders before the Delphi
22 survey is distributed.
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28 29 **Research Question**

30 Which outcomes do patients and healthcare professionals think should be included in a core
31 outcome set for research studies on CES patients?
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35 36 **Method**

37 In our “modified” Delphi, questioning will take place in two rounds. The condensed list of
38 outcomes derived from the long list will be presented in the first round of the Delphi.
39 Patients can also suggest outcomes that have not been mentioned in the first round but
40 these will not be scored. They will be considered for inclusion into the second round of the
41 Delphi if, as judged by the CES study team, the outcome does not reflect or is not similar to
42 another outcome already listed. After the first round, an anonymous summary of the
43 responses is fed back to the group. Individual participants can decide to keep their original
44 answers or to change their opinion in the next round. This will lead to the group converging
45 on a consensus opinion over the course of these two rounds (23). The Delphi will be done by
46 healthcare professionals, and patients.
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3 The level of anonymity will be “fully anonymised” (23) so participants do not know the
4 identities of other individuals in the group and they will not know specific answers other
5 individuals had given.
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9 10 **Inclusion criteria**

11 Participants will be recruited from two key stakeholder groups: patients and healthcare
12 professionals. All participants should be adults over 18 years of age and able to complete an
13 online survey in the English language.
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16 *Patients-* Participants who have had an operation for CES.

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18 *Healthcare Professionals-* All members of the clinical team involved in directly caring for a
19 patient with CES after surgery such as:
20

- 21 • Spinal surgeons
- 22 • Spinal specialist nurses
- 23 • Neuro-rehabilitation doctors
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29 **Sampling and Recruitment**

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31 *Patients-* At the main site the clinical care team have a pre-existing database of CES patients
32 they have clinically managed. The clinical care team will send an invitation letter to the
33 home address of these patients. There will be no follow up calls or further correspondence.
34 It is the patient’s decision if they wish to be involved and the invitation will contain details of
35 the website address patients can access if they wish to find out more details regarding the
36 study. Online patient groups for CES will be contacted internationally. A named contact for
37 each group will act as the liaison member to circulate the participant invitation email and
38 poster. This may include the patient groups sharing the recruitment details on social media.
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46 *Healthcare Professionals-* The main study site has spinal MDT (multi-disciplinary team)
47 meetings held weekly. The co-ordinator has a pre-set mailing list that goes to healthcare
48 professionals involved in the meeting. This will be used to send the participant invitation
49 email. The membership of national and international associations will be contacted and
50 invited to participate. A few are listed here below as an example:
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- 53 • Society of British Neurological Surgeons (SBNS)
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- British Association of Spine Surgeons (BASS)
- Australian Spine Society
- North American Spine Association (NASS)

Known contacts of the CES study group will be contacted and invited to participate.

Snowballing sampling will be used to increase the sample size. The participant invitation email/ letter will be the first contact for healthcare professionals and patients, which is a short introduction and summary of the study. If they are interested further the participant can proceed to the registration website for further details and obtain a copy of the participant information leaflet.

Sample Size

There are no strict recommendations for the number of participants required in a Delphi study to gain consensus (23). In general, having more participants will increase the reliability of the group judgement (24). We intend to take a pragmatic approach to sample size and would like to invite all individuals who meet the inclusion criteria as identified above.

Documentation of the number invited and the number from each stakeholder group will be recorded. No further participants will be invited after the first round of the Delphi.

Consent

Consent will be implicit by the participant registering to take part in the Delphi process via the website.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire is constructed and delivered in an online format using the DelphiManager software developed by the COMET initiative. Before starting the questionnaire, the participant will be asked to clarify which of the two stakeholder groups they belong to. For each stakeholder group, specific information will be collected:

- *Patients*- Age, gender, location, surgery for CES, years since surgery for CES, employment status
- *Healthcare professionals*- Practicing Field (spinal surgeon, specialist nurse, neuro-rehabilitation etc), years in practice, location, gender

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5 Following confirmation of their eligibility to participate in the study, participants will be sent
6 an on-line link to access the first round of the Delphi process. Instructions of how to
7 complete the questionnaire will be included at the beginning of each round. Only
8 participants who respond to the 1st round of the Delphi will be invited to participate in 2nd
9 round taking the assumption that if they had not participated in the first round they would
10 be unwilling to participate in the second round. Data will be collected over at least a 4-week
11 period for each round of the Delphi process. Participants who have not completed the
12 survey will be sent reminders via email when they have 2 weeks, 1 week and 48 hours
13 remaining for completion of the survey. Participants who have not completed the
14 questionnaire within 4 weeks of the start will be deemed not to have completed that round
15 of the Delphi. The language used by patients in the qualitative interviews will be used to
16 help term the outcomes for the Delphi. Plain language summaries by the COMET Patient
17 Participation, Involvement and Engagement (PoPIE) group was used to develop the Delphi
18 information sheet. The Delphi will be piloted with 2 participants from each stakeholder
19 group to highlight any issues with understanding or validity.
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31 32 **Scoring**

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34 For an outcome to be included in the core outcome set there must be a majority agreement
35 of the critical importance of the outcome and minority agreement that the outcome is not
36 important. Therefore, in respect for an outcome to be excluded there must be majority
37 agreement that it is not important and minority agreement that it is important (25). This is
38 in par with the GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and
39 Evaluation) working group recommendations (<http://www.gradeworkinggroup.org>) (26,27).
40 At the beginning of the Delphi, participants will be reminded the importance of completing
41 the entire Delphi process. Round one of the Delphi study we will ask participants to rate
42 each outcome using a 9 point Likert scale. This scoring system was chosen after previous
43 studies and expert databases showed it differentiates the most between questionnaire
44 items (23) (<http://www.comet-initiative.org>). 7-9 indicates critical importance. 4 to 6
45 represents outcomes that are important but not critical whilst 1 to 3 are deemed to be of
46 limited importance. All outcomes will be carried through to second round with first round
47 scores displayed for each outcome. Round two will present the anonymised feedback from
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each participant stakeholder groups (patient and healthcare professionals). The feedback will show the cumulated scores from each stakeholder group for each outcome and the participant will be asked to rate the outcomes again using the same 9 point Likert scale. If they change their score on the second round they will have the opportunity to explain their reasoning for this. Outcomes which have been suggested in round 1 by the participants and deemed appropriate by the study group will then be entered in for rating in the second round by key stakeholders. After the final Delphi round, there will be a list developed from all stakeholder groups, which will be submitted to a face to face consensus meeting of key stakeholders to discuss what outcomes that should be finally included in the core outcome set. All stakeholder groups who had completed the Delphi survey will be invited to participate in the consensus meeting. Ideally, a trained facilitator would chair this meeting.

Analysis

Consensus that an outcome should not be included in the COS could, for example, be defined as 70% or more scoring it as 1 to 3 and fewer than 15% scoring it as 7 to 9, which has been seen to be successful with the development of other core outcome sets (28,29) (**Table 4**). This will be done for each stakeholder group. Results at the multiple rounds of the Delphi process and consensus meeting will be documented to include number of participants invited, number completing the section, measure of each group response to an outcome leading to a comprehensive list of all outcomes that should be included in the COS CES.

Table 4. Definitions of a consensus

Classification of consensus	Description	Definition
IN	Consensus that outcome should be included in the core outcome set	70% or more participants scoring as 7 to 9 AND <15% participants scoring as 1 to 3
OUT	Consensus that outcome should not be included in the core outcome set	70% or more participants scoring as 1 to 3 AND <15% of participants scoring as 7 to 9

NO CONSENSUS	Uncertainty about importance of outcome	Anything else
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Attrition

It is expected that some participants will drop out after each round of the Delphi. Each participant will be given a unique participant number when they complete the first round of the Delphi, which will allow identification of the attrition rates between rounds. This will allow identification of participants who have completed all rounds and see if there is any difference bias between those participants who complete the process. We would compare the mean round 1 scores for the participants who completed round 1 and round 2 compared with those that dropped out after round 1.

Phase 4: Consensus Meeting

All participants registering for the Delphi survey will be asked whether they would be happy to attend a face to face consensus meeting involving patients and healthcare professionals. This would be set up as a tick box on the registration page for the online Delphi. A minority of participants at the consensus meeting will be invited before the Delphi survey to attend the consensus meeting but on the premise, that both rounds of the Delphi are completed. This is to make sure there is representation from certain organisations closely involved with CES patients, research or management. Most participants at the consensus meeting will be those who have completed all rounds of the Delphi and ticked their interest to attend the consensus meeting during registration.

In the development of a breast reconstruction core outcome set patients and professionals were recruited in a 2:1 ratio so that patients' views were represented preferentially as the procedure is a patient selected optional intervention (30). In our study, surgery for CES is usually done as an emergency operation in most cases and strongly recommended to patients so a 1:1 ratio would be expected but we will be pragmatic depending on our response rate. This is to maximise the number of participants involved to help achieve consensus. If there is an overwhelming response with more than 40 participants interested in attending the consensus meeting the study team will consider applying stratified

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3 purposive sampling. On the day of the consensus meeting consent will be obtained from the
4 patient participants. Results of the Delphi process will be discussed at the consensus
5 meeting. Outcomes categorised as consensus “in” across both stakeholder groups will be
6 included in the final core outcome set. Outcomes categorised as consensus “out” across
7 both stakeholder groups will be excluded from the final core outcome set. Participants at
8 the meeting can vote to accept this or to suggest outcomes from the group that may need
9 further discussion. These outcomes plus “no consensus” outcomes will be discussed with
10 further rounds of voting to agree the final core outcome set. If there is no agreed final core
11 outcome set at the end of the first meeting subsequent meetings will be arranged for this to
12 happen.
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22 **ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION**

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25 REC and HRA approval was obtained on the 6 December 2016 for the qualitative interviews
26 from South Central - Hampshire A Research Ethics Committee. REC reference 16/SC/0587.
27 REC and HRA approval was obtained on 26 March 2018 for the Delphi process and
28 consensus meeting from North West- Greater Manchester Central Research Ethics
29 Committee. REC reference was 18/NW/0022. We intend to publish the results of the core
30 outcome set for CES in an open access journal. It will also be made available through the CES
31 patient websites. Results will be disseminated through International and national
32 presentations. The next step would be to identify the appropriate measurement instrument
33 for each of the outcomes in the core outcome set (31). Core outcome sets are developed in
34 a number of clinical areas and their use is advocated in the UK by the National Institute for
35 Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment (HTA), Cochrane Reviews of the
36 effects of Healthcare intervention (32) and by World Health Organisation (WHO) handbook
37 for guideline development (10). The NIHR HTA has added this statement to their application
38 form, “Where established core outcomes exist they should be included among the list of
39 outcomes unless there is a good reason to do otherwise.” By developing the CES COS we
40 intend to reduce outcome reporting bias, heterogeneity, and improve the quality of
41 research studies in CES. This will allow us to synthesise the data and make more robust
42 evidence based decisions regarding CES management.
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Supplementary file 1- Topic guide

Author Contributions

NS, MW, SC conceived the project. TM is the principal investigator for the study. NS is the clinical research fellow responsible for management of the project, wrote the protocol and manuscript. TM, PW, AN, MW, SC provide supervision, have input in all aspects of the project and commented on drafts of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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Competing Interests

None Declared

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IRAS: 201946 Version: 1.0 Date: 23/09/16

TOPIC GUIDE CES QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Aims and Objectives

- To explore the patient experience of living with Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES)
- To ascertain what the patient feels are the most important outcomes that they are experiencing
- To ascertain what outcomes the patient feels are the most important to research in to improve CES management and aftercare
- To determine who should be key stakeholders
- Identify appropriate language to use for patient Delphi iterative process.

Introduction (5-10 mins)

Interviewer Name

Interviewer Occupation

Explain basic definition of CES

Explain looking for challenges experienced after the operation for CES

Explain expected intention, sensitive subjects and duration of interview and confidentiality

Confirm consent to qualitative interview

Background (<5 mins)

Interviewee name

Interviewee age

Interviewee occupation

Other medical conditions

When was your operation for CES?

Interview questions (30 mins)

How has your experience of this condition; Cauda Equina Syndrome been?

- What was it like before the back operation?

- What was it like after the back operation?

How do you feel your condition has been managed in hospital and in the community?

What were your expectations of life health-wise after the operation and what is the reality like?

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3 Due to this condition what do you feel are the challenges to your health and
4 wellbeing?

5 -bowel/bladder

6 -sex life

7 -back/ leg pain

8 -psychological

9 -**anxiety/fear**

10 -other
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14 Would you be able to prioritise the importance of these for you now?
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16 Was the importance of these different at earlier stages of the condition? (More
17 relevant to those in the long term CES category)
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19 Through this process of living with CES who else do you think has a good handle
20 on the condition? If anyone? -Gauge other potential key stakeholders
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23 Tell me a bit about the support you had for the condition?
24

25 **Closing remarks (5 mins)**
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27 Considering your hospital, post op and follow up experience what would you
28 have liked to change?
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30 -support services

31 -more streamlined service with dedicated clinics

32 -research into timing for CES operations

33 -follow up as to the effects of long term CES
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36 Offer the opportunity for the participant to comment on their interview
37 transcript after transcription.
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BMJ Open

PROTOCOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CORE OUTCOME SET FOR CAUDA EQUINA SYNDROME: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS, DELPHI SURVEY AND CONSENSUS MEETING

Journal:	<i>BMJ Open</i>
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Primary Subject Heading:	Surgery
Secondary Subject Heading:	Medical management, Patient-centred medicine, Qualitative research, Research methods, Neurology
Keywords:	Cauda Equina Syndrome, Core Outcome Set, Delphi, Systematic Literature Review, Qualitative Interviews, Consensus

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Manuscripts

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3 **PROTOCOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CORE OUTCOME SET FOR CAUDA EQUINA**
4 **SYNDROME: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS, DELPHI SURVEY**
5 **AND CONSENSUS MEETING**
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40 **Keywords**

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42 Cauda Equina Syndrome, Surgery, Outcomes, Core Outcome Set, Systematic Literature Review,
43 Qualitative Interviews, Delphi Survey, Consensus Meeting
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5 **Word Count 5,246**

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7 **ABSTRACT**

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9 **Introduction**

10 Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES) is a serious neurological condition most commonly due to
11 compression of the lumbosacral nerve roots, which can result in significant disability. The
12 evidence for acute intervention in CES is mainly from retrospective studies. There is
13 heterogeneity in the outcomes chosen for analysis in these studies, which makes it difficult to
14 synthesise the data across studies. This study will develop a core outcome set for use in future
15 studies of CES, engaging with key stakeholders and using transparent methodology. This will
16 help ensure that relevant outcomes are used in future, and will facilitate attempts to
17 summarise data across studies in systematic reviews.
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27 **Methods and Analysis**

28 A systematic literature review will document all the outcomes for CES after surgery mentioned
29 in the literature. The qualitative interviews will be semi structured, audio recorded, transcribed
30 and thematically analysed with the use of NVivo version 10 to determine the themes and the
31 outcomes described by CES patients. The outcomes from the literature review and patient
32 interviews will be combined and prioritised to determine what the most important outcomes
33 are in CES research studies to patients and healthcare professionals. The prioritisation will be
34 done through a two-round iterative Delphi survey and a consensus meeting. This process will
35 decide the core outcome set for patients with CES.
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45 **Ethics and Dissemination**

46 REC and HRA approval was obtained on the 6/12/16 for the qualitative interviews from South
47 Central - Hampshire A REC. REC reference 16/SC/0587. REC and HRA approval was obtained on
48 26/3/18 for the Delphi process and consensus meeting from North West- Greater Manchester
49 Central REC. REC reference was 18/NW/0022. The final core outcome set will be published and
50 freely available.
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Registration Details

This study is registered with the Core Outcome Measures in Effectiveness Trials (COMET) database as study 824.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

- The main strength for this study is a transparent consensus process which involves key stakeholders (patients and healthcare professionals) to decide a core outcome set for CES.
- A core outcome set will allow synthesis of data from future CES research studies and allow an evidence based treatment and management plan to be developed.
- The development of a core outcome set relies on the assumption that the key stakeholders will eventually come to a consensus.
- The outcomes that constitute the “core outcome set” will be reported. How these outcomes will be measured will not be determined in this study and requires further work.

INTRODUCTION

Cauda equina syndrome (CES) is due to dysfunction of the lumbosacral nerve roots beneath the conus medullaris resulting in sensory-motor deficits of the lower limbs and sphincter dysfunction. Symptoms and signs include low back pain, unilateral or bilateral sciatica, saddle anaesthesia and motor weakness of the lower extremities with bladder and/or bowel dysfunction^{1 2}. The most common cause of CES is a herniated lumbar disc, and represents 2% of all herniated lumbar discs. CES has an incidence of 2 per 100,000 in England and is an indication for emergency decompression surgery^{3 4 5}. Other less common etiologies include spinal stenosis, spinal tumours, hematomas, fractures, and infections². The National Spinal Task Force showed that there are 981 operations done each year for CES in the UK from 2010 to 2011⁶. Surgical intervention for CES is not a rare procedure and the economic burden of severe disability is a worrying unknown for both patient quality of life and development of appropriate health services.

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3 The evidence for acute intervention in CES is mainly from retrospective studies^{7 8}. The
4 importance of categorising CES into CES incomplete (CESI) and CES complete with urinary
5 retention (CESR) has been highlighted in the literature⁴. CESR describes painless urinary
6 retention with overflow incontinence and complete perianal sensory loss. When the patient
7 complains of CESI, the symptoms include urinary issues of neurogenic origin including loss of
8 desire to void, altered urinary sensation, and hesitancy with partial saddle anaesthesia.
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16 It is documented in the literature that timely operative decompression for CES secondary to
17 herniated lumbar disc can lead to improved outcomes in patients^{9 7 8}. In fact, delay or missed
18 diagnosis of this condition incurs heavy litigation costs to the NHS at £336,000 (US \$549,427)
19 per case on average¹⁰ as reported to the Medical Defence Union in the UK.
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25 **Rationale for the development of a “Core Outcome Set” (COS)**

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28 An “outcome” in relation to clinical research studies is defined to be a measurement or
29 observation used to capture and assess the effect of treatment such as assessment of the side
30 effects (risk) or effectiveness (benefits).¹¹
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35 Before the systematic literature review a scoping review was undertaken¹². It was identified
36 that there were no randomised controlled trials, many retrospective observational studies and
37 few prospective studies reporting the clinical outcome of patients with CES. There is
38 heterogeneity and inconsistency in the outcomes reported in the literature for CES. The
39 outcomes reported in the literature have not been independently validated as important to key
40 stakeholders.
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46 There is no defined core outcome set in cauda equina syndrome (CES) currently and this
47 protocol will describe the methods of how to develop it. A core outcome set defines the
48 minimum outcomes that should be consistently measured and reported in clinical trials in a
49 specific area of healthcare¹³. With this there will be greater reporting consistency and a
50 reduction in outcome reporting bias in healthcare studies contributing to systematic reviews
51 and meta-analysis¹⁴ that can lead to informed healthcare decisions.
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Initially, a systematic literature review and qualitative patient interviews will be conducted to document the outcomes for CES patients after surgery. These outcomes will be combined and prioritised through two rounds of a Delphi process with key stakeholders and a consensus meeting to decide the core outcome set. The core outcome set would be published and used for future research studies and improving outcome reporting in CES.

The development of core outcome sets has been done successfully in rheumatology with the OMERACT group (Outcomes Measures in Rheumatoid Arthritis Clinical Trials). This international collaboration was developed in the early 1990s involving patients in the development of core outcome sets and has improved consistency of reported trials in this speciality^{14 15}. The Core Outcome Measures in Effectiveness Trials (COMET) initiative advocates the involvement of patients and currently holds a database of on-going core outcome set developers¹⁶ to minimise duplication and foster health service user engagement^{13 17}.

Scope of the COS

We aim to identify “what” outcomes of patients with CES are of concern to key stakeholders using transparent methodology. We are not intending to consider how these outcomes should be measured. The 11 minimum Core Outcome Set Standards for Development (COS-STAD) recommendations are addressed in this protocol¹⁸ (**Table 1**).

Table 1. COS-STAD recommendations

Domain	Standard Number	Methodology	Notes
Scope Specification	1	The research or practice setting in which the COS is to be applied	Research studies that will inform clinical decision making
	2	The health condition(s) covered by the COS	All severities of Cauda Equina Syndrome
	3	The population(s) covered by the COS	Human adults aged 18 or above
	4	The intervention(s) covered by the COS	Clinical management of CES including surgery
Stakeholders	5	Those who will use the COS in research	Clinical trialists in CES are healthcare

involved			professionals who manage CES patients. They are included in standard 6.
	6	Healthcare professionals with experience of patients with the condition	This will include clinicians, experts and healthcare professionals involved in CES management
	7	Patients with the condition or their representatives	Patients with a diagnosis of CES will be included ¹⁹
Consensus Process	8	The initial list of outcomes considered both healthcare professionals and patients views	Systematic Literature review ²⁰ considered healthcare professional views. Qualitative interviews considered patient views.
	9	A scoring process and consensus definition were described a priori	Described in “Scoring” and “Analysis” section of this protocol
	10	Criteria for including/dropping/adding outcomes were described a priori	Described in “Analysis” section of this protocol
	11	Care was taken to avoid ambiguity of language used in the list of outcomes	Plain language and clinical explanations available. These will be pilot tested with patients and healthcare professionals.

Registration

The study is registered on the COMET database as study 824 (<http://www.comet-initiative.org/studies/details/824?result=true>).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Development of the core outcome set will be developed in four phases with their estimated time frames highlighted in the overall study timeline (**Figure 1**). Timeframes includes the estimated duration for ethical approval, study recruitment and analysis.

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

Research Question

What outcomes are reported in the medical literature after surgery for CES?

Summary

The aim of the systematic literature review was to summarise the reporting standards of the clinical outcomes after surgery in CES patients following the PRISMA guidelines²¹. Most CES cases are due to lumbar disc herniation²², which requires urgent surgical intervention. Study inclusion was limited to articles with patients who were surgically managed and whose outcomes were recorded.

The systematic literature review summarised the outcomes that had been mentioned in the literature and categorised them into a known taxonomy²³. 1873 articles were identified through the search strategy of which 61 met the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria specified details regarding the study design, diagnosis, procedure, publication date, language and the patient age. 737 outcomes were reported verbatim in the 61 included articles. These were then

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3 categorised to 20 higher order groupings called “outcome domains.” The most commonly
4 reported outcomes were bladder function (70.5%), motor function (63.9%), and sensation
5 (50.8%). There was significant variation in the terms used for each outcome for example,
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7 bladder function outcome domain had 141 different terms. Significant heterogeneity was
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9 evident in the outcomes reported in CES research studies. This highlighted a need for a core
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11 outcome set in CES to be developed.²⁰
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16 ***Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews***

17 **Research Question**

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21 What outcomes have CES patients experienced after surgery and how do they feel about the
22
23 management before and after surgery?
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26 **Method**

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29 The objectives of the qualitative interviews with CES patients are:

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31 • To explore the patient experience of living with CES.
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33 • To document what the patient describes as the most important outcomes they are
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35 experiencing.
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37 • To determine what service improvements can be made to improve CES management and
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39 aftercare.
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41 • To determine who should be the key stakeholders in the Delphi survey.
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43 • Identify appropriate language to use for the Delphi survey²⁴.
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47 These interviews will be documented with audio recorded transcripts. The list of all potential
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49 outcomes from the systematic review and qualitative interviews will be placed into outcome
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51 domains by the research team to avoid repetition by qualitative method of content analysis²⁵.

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53 The qualitative interviews will be piloted with 2 CES patients to establish if the interview
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55 structure and technique is clear, understandable, and capable of answering the research
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questions. This would recognise any corrections that need to be made to the interview structure or technique. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion criteria for qualitative interviews

INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
Adult patients	Adults unable to consent for research
Diagnosis of Cauda Equina Syndrome	
Patient underwent a surgical procedure for CES	
Less than 10 years since the surgical procedure	
Ability to converse in English and to consent for research	

Participant Selection

Adult patients for the qualitative interviews will be selected from those coded as having a diagnosis of cauda equina syndrome in the medical records. There is an existing database of cauda equina patients who have been operated on and followed up by consultants, registrars or nurse specialists depending on the next available clinic. Adult patients will be 18 years or older who have had spinal surgery to remove the compressive lesion at a single tertiary NHS institution over the past 10 years. The qualitative interviews will capture short and long term outcomes that are deemed important to them. Duration of the recorded outcomes will be calculated since the initial operation for CES.

Stratified purposive sampling²⁶ was chosen in which the aim is to select groups that display variation in particular characteristics so the subgroups can then be compared. Characteristics known to have an impact on the outcomes being investigated have been identified- severity of CES (CESI or CESR)²⁷ then there is a subgroup about which little is known and whose circumstances and views need to be explored; short (≤ 2 years) or long term (> 2 years and ≤ 10 years) since the operation (see **Table 3**). This will produce 4 subcategories to populate. This is to prevent potential bias you may get from having many patients who presented with a severe

clinical picture and poor outcomes being more forthcoming and vocal. All subcategories for the sampling frame will be deemed a priority. Half the participants would ideally be male and half would be female.

Table 3. Sampling frame with suggested quotas

	CESI (Cauda Equina Syndrome Incomplete)	CESR (Cauda Equina Syndrome with retention)
Short term since the operation (≤ 2 years)	10 participants	10 participants
Long term since the operation (> 2 years ≤ 10 years)	10 participants	10 participants

There is an existing database of 200 patients with contact details and clinical details of presentation and management, which will be updated up to the current date to exclude patients who are deceased. This should produce 50 patients per category. Due to reasons such as long travel distance from institution, not interested in participating it is anticipated that up to 10 patients may reply from each category, which would produce up to 40 patients in total. Options will be given to be interviewed at home, via electronic media (Skype), over the phone or to attend the hospital in person. After informed consent, patients will be interviewed until “data saturation” is reached. The research team will decide when data saturation is reached. Data saturation is the point where increasing the sample size no longer contributes to new evidence²⁸ moreover even large qualitative studies do not interview more than 50 people²⁹. Additional patients will be interviewed in the subcategories if one group has a better response rate until data saturation is achieved.

Sticking rigidly to a sample frame could be counter-intuitive as one patient can be data rich during the interview as opposed to interviewing 5 patients where data is not rich. The aim is to collect rich data to allow in depth analysis²⁸. So, although the sampling frame may serve as a guide it will not be used to start restricting participants especially at the initial stages of doing the qualitative interviews until data saturation is achieved.

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3 An information leaflet and stamped addressed envelope to return the response slip will be sent
4 to participants with a consent form. Patients will have 3 weeks to “opt-out” of the study by
5 returning a response slip, through email or telephone with the research team. After this the
6 participants will receive a phone call from the research team to confirm interest for
7 participating in the study, to answer any further questions and to arrange a time and location
8 for the interview.
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16 **Interview Format and Analysis**

17 A semi-structured interview format will be utilised as per our topic guide (**Supplementary file**
18 **1**). Qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen over questionnaires and focus groups as
19 it was believed that patient opinions over sensitive subject matter such as bowel, bladder and
20 sexual function would be better elicited in a private one to one interview and they were less
21 likely to inhibit their contribution²⁸. In addition, one-to-one interviews are more accessible for
22 potential participants and for patients with mobility restrictions.
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29 Informed consent will be obtained prior to the interview where anonymity and confidentiality
30 will be expressed. The consent will also request the patient’s permission for their general
31 practitioner (GP) to be informed of their involvement in the study. This is so that if there is any
32 distress during the patient interviews, which requires medical management they can be
33 referred to their GP. Open-ended non-leading questions on their diagnosis, management post
34 operatively in hospital and management in the community will be asked allowing the
35 participant to describe their experiences without unnecessary interruption²⁹. Discussion will be
36 directed towards outcomes of importance to the patient as seen in the topic guide. The
37 interviewer will not discuss their own opinions about CES and if these are asked they will be
38 answered at the end of the interview session. Reflexivity is an important concept during
39 qualitative research for striving towards objectivity and neutrality²⁸ and the analysis of the
40 interviews will consider if bias from the interviewer’s own beliefs may have crept in. It is
41 anticipated that the interview will last for 45 minutes to an hour at each sitting to prevent the
42 participant feeling fatigued. The same interviewer (NS) will be used for all the patient
43 interviews. All interviewees will be made aware that the interviewer is a doctor not involved in
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3 their on-going care. A sample of the transcripts will be reviewed by a supervisor not involved in
4 the qualitative interviews to confirm that they were undertaken in a satisfactory manner.
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6 Initially, the transcripts will be reviewed to start identifying which outcomes are important to
7 the patients by labelling the data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software version 10. A
8 pragmatic approach will be taken by using thematic analysis as per the Braun and Clarke
9 method³⁰. It is a pattern-based qualitative method like grounded theory³¹ and interpretative
10 phenomenological analysis³² but is not linked to a specific theoretical framework. This method
11 will allow summarisation of the key outcomes of each individual transcript and overall themes
12 whilst retaining the context and language in which it was expressed²⁸. The qualitative
13 interviews will be reported as outlined by the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative
14 research (COREQ); a 32 item checklist³³.
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25 ***Phase 3: The Delphi Survey***

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29 The outcomes from the systematic literature review and qualitative interviews will create a long
30 list¹¹. This will be condensed by grouping similar outcomes into domains and conforming with
31 the taxonomy used in the systematic literature review^{20 23}. This will be reviewed and agreed by
32 the study team and pilot tested with the key stakeholders before the Delphi survey is
33 distributed.
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40 **Research Question**

41 Which outcomes do patients and healthcare professionals think should be included in a core
42 outcome set for patients with CES?
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47 **Method**

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49 All patients with CES will be invited to participate in the Delphi survey regardless of whether
50 they had had surgery or not. Although there are a minority of participants in the category of
51 non-operative management of CES³⁴ it was decided by the study team that including them will
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3 be an opportunity to consider their input and maximise recruitment. The Delphi will be done by
4 healthcare professionals and patients.

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7 To achieve a priority list, we will use the “modified” Delphi method³⁵ as opposed to the
8 “traditional” Delphi method³⁶. Traditionally in a Delphi survey patients are asked open
9 questions in the first round of the Delphi and the answers would constitute the outcomes rated
10 in the second round. In the “modified” Delphi, which will be used in this study, rating the
11 outcomes will take place over two rounds. A list of outcomes previously attained from the
12 systematic literature review and qualitative interviews will be presented in the first round of
13 the Delphi ³⁵. Patients can also suggest outcomes that have not been mentioned in the first
14 round but these will not be scored. They will be considered for inclusion into the second round
15 of the Delphi if, as judged by the CES study team, the outcome does not reflect or is not similar
16 to another outcome already listed. The CES study team includes a patient representative.
17 The level of anonymity will be “fully anonymised” ³⁷ so participants do not know the identities
18 of other individuals in the group and they will not know the specific answers other individuals
19 give. In round 2 of the Delphi, participants will know the group responses from the patient
20 group and the healthcare professional group. Individual participants can decide to keep their
21 original rating or to change their rating in the next round. This will lead to the group converging
22 on a consensus opinion over the course of these two rounds ³⁷.
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38 **Inclusion criteria**

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40 Participants will be recruited from two key stakeholder groups: patients and healthcare
41 professionals. All participants will be adults over 18 years of age and able to complete an online
42 survey in the English language.
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45 *Patients-* Participants who have had an operation for CES.

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47 *Healthcare Professionals-* All members of the clinical team involved in directly caring for a
48 patient with CES such as:
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- 50
- 51 • Spinal surgeons
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- 53 • Spinal specialist nurses
- 54
- 55 • Neuro-rehabilitation doctors
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Sampling and Recruitment

Patients- At the main site the clinical care team have a pre-existing database of CES patients they have clinically managed. The clinical care team will send an invitation letter to the home address of these patients. There will be no follow up calls or further correspondence. It is the patient's decision if they wish to be involved and the invitation will contain details of the website address patients can access if they wish to find out more details regarding the study. Online patient groups for CES will be contacted internationally. A named contact for each group will act as the liaison member to circulate the participant invitation email and poster. This may include the patient groups sharing the recruitment details on social media.

Healthcare Professionals- The main study site has spinal MDT (multi-disciplinary team) meetings held weekly. The coordinator has a pre-set mailing list that goes to healthcare professionals involved in the meeting. This will be used to send the participant invitation email. The membership of national and international associations will be contacted and invited to participate. They include different healthcare professionals in their membership categories.

Some examples are listed below:

- Society of British Neurological Surgeons (SBNS)
- British Association of Spine Surgeons (BASS)
- World Federation of Neuro-rehabilitation (WFNR)
- Spinal Injuries Association (SIA)

Known contacts of the CES study group will be contacted and invited to participate. Snowballing sampling will be used to increase the sample size. The participant invitation email/ letter will be the first contact for healthcare professionals and patients, which is a short introduction and summary of the study. If they are interested further the participant can proceed to the registration website for further details and obtain a copy of the participant information leaflet.

Sample Size

There are no strict recommendations for the number of participants (patients and healthcare

professionals) required in a Delphi study to gain consensus³⁷. In general, having more participants will increase the reliability of the group judgement³⁸. A pragmatic approach to sample size will be taken and all individuals who meet the inclusion criteria as identified above will be invited to participate. The recruitment phase will be 2 months before the first round of the Delphi survey is released. Documentation of the organisations who distribute the Delphi invitation from each stakeholder group will be recorded. No further participants will be invited after the first round of the Delphi.

Consent

Consent will be implicit by the participant (patients and healthcare professionals) registering their name and email address to take part in the Delphi survey via the website.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire is constructed and delivered in an online format using the DelphiManager software developed by the COMET initiative. Before starting the questionnaire, the participant will be asked to clarify which of the two stakeholder groups they belong to. For each stakeholder group, specific information will be collected:

- *Patients*- Age, gender, location, surgery for CES- yes/no, years since surgery for CES, employed- full time/ employed- part time/ unemployed
- *Healthcare professionals*- Practicing Field (spinal surgeon, specialist nurse, neuro-rehabilitation etc), years in practice, location, gender

Following confirmation of their eligibility to participate in the study, participants will be sent an on-line link to access the first round of the Delphi process. Instructions of how to complete the questionnaire will be included at the beginning of each round. Only participants who respond to the 1st round of the Delphi will be invited to participate in 2nd round taking the assumption that if they had not participated in the first round they would be unwilling to participate in the second round. Data will be collected over at least a 4-week period for each round of the Delphi process. Participants who have not completed the survey will be sent reminders via email when they have 2 weeks, 1 week and 48 hours remaining for completion of the survey. Participants

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3 who have not completed the questionnaire within 4 weeks of the start will be deemed not to
4 have completed that round of the Delphi. The language used by patients in the qualitative
5 interviews will be used to help term the outcomes for the Delphi. Plain language summaries by
6 the COMET Patient Participation, Involvement and Engagement (PoPPiE) group was used to
7 develop the Delphi information sheet. The Delphi will be piloted with 2 participants from each
8 stakeholder group to highlight any issues with understanding or validity.
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16 **Scoring**

17 For an outcome to be included in the core outcome set there must be a majority agreement of
18 the critical importance of the outcome and minority agreement that the outcome is not
19 important³⁹. This is in par with the GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment,
20 Development and Evaluation) working group recommendations
21 (<http://www.gradeworkinggroup.org>;^{40 41}. At the beginning of the Delphi, participants will be
22 reminded the importance of completing the entire Delphi process. Round one of the Delphi
23 study we will ask participants to rate each outcome using a 9 point Likert scale. This scoring
24 system was chosen after previous studies and expert databases showed it differentiates the
25 most between questionnaire items^{16 37}. 7-9 indicates critical importance. 4 to 6 represents
26 outcomes that are important but not critical whilst 1 to 3 are deemed to be of limited
27 importance. All outcomes will be carried through to second round with anonymised feedback of
28 first round scores from the patient group and from the healthcare professional group displayed
29 for each outcome. The feedback will show the cumulated scores from each stakeholder group
30 for each outcome and the participant will be asked to rate the outcomes again using the same 9
31 point Likert scale. If they change their score on the second round they will have the opportunity
32 to explain their reasoning for this. Outcomes which have been suggested in round 1 by the
33 participants and deemed appropriate by the study group will then be entered in for rating in
34 the second round by key stakeholders. After the final Delphi round, there will be a list
35 developed from all stakeholder groups, which will be submitted to a face to face consensus
36 meeting of key stakeholders to discuss what outcomes that should be finally included in the
37 core outcome set. All participants who had completed both rounds of the Delphi survey will be
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eligible for invitation to the consensus meeting. A trained independent facilitator would chair this meeting.

Analysis

Consensus that an outcome should be included in the core outcome set is defined as 70% or more scoring it as 7 to 9 and fewer than 15% scoring it as 1 to 3, which has been seen to be successful with the development of other core outcome sets^{42 43} (**Table 4**). This will be done for each stakeholder group. Results at the multiple rounds of the Delphi process and consensus meeting will be documented to include the number of participants invited, number completing the section, measure of each group response to an outcome leading to a comprehensive list of all outcomes that should be included in the COS CES.

Table 4. Definitions of a consensus

Classification of consensus	Description	Definition
IN	Consensus that outcome should be included in the core outcome set	70% or more participants scoring as 7 to 9 AND <15% participants scoring as 1 to 3 in both stakeholder groups
OUT	Consensus that outcome should not be included in the core outcome set	50% or less participants scoring 7 to 9 in both stakeholder groups
NO CONSENSUS	Uncertainty about importance of outcome	Anything else

Attrition

It is expected that some participants will drop out after each round of the Delphi. Each participant will be given a unique participant number when they complete the first round of the Delphi, which will allow calculation of the attrition rates between rounds. This will allow

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3 identification of participants who have completed all rounds and see if there is any difference
4 bias between those participants who complete the process. Mean round 1 scores for the
5 participants who completed round 1 and round 2 will be compared with those that dropped out
6 after round 1.
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10 11 12 **Phase 4: Consensus Meeting** 13

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16 All participants registering for the Delphi survey will be asked if they would be happy to attend
17 a face to face consensus meeting involving patients and healthcare professionals. They will
18 need to complete both rounds of the Delphi survey to be eligible to attend. This would be set
19 up as a tick box on the registration page for the online Delphi.
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23 40 participants will be invited to the consensus meeting. This will include 20 healthcare
24 professionals and 20 patients. Out of the 40 participants; 30 will be from the UK and 10 will be
25 international. Standard travel expenses and hotel accommodation will be reimbursed or
26 provided. 10 of the participants at the consensus meeting will be invited before the Delphi
27 survey is released to attend the consensus meeting but on the premise, that both rounds of the
28 Delphi are completed. This is to make sure there is representation at the consensus meeting
29 from key stakeholder organisations closely involved with CES patients, research or
30 management. 30 participants at the consensus meeting will be those who have completed both
31 rounds of the Delphi and ticked their interest to attend the consensus meeting during
32 registration.
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43 In the development of a breast reconstruction core outcome set patients and professionals
44 were recruited in a 2:1 ratio so that patients' views were represented preferentially as the
45 procedure is a patient selected optional intervention⁴⁴. In our study, clinical intervention for
46 cauda equina syndrome is performed as an emergency so it was deemed appropriate by the
47 study team to have a 1:1 ratio of patients and healthcare professionals. This is to maximise the
48 number of participants involved to help achieve consensus. In addition, the core outcome set
49 should reflect all key stakeholders input equally. If there is an overwhelming response with
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3 more than 40 participants interested in attending the consensus meeting the study team will
4 apply stratified purposive sampling. On the day of the consensus meeting informed consent will
5 be obtained from the patient participants.
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8 Outcomes categorised as “consensus in” across both stakeholder groups from the Delphi survey
9 **(Table 4)** will be included in the final core outcome set. Outcomes categorised as “consensus
10 out” across both stakeholder groups from the Delphi survey will be excluded from the final core
11 outcome set. Results of the Delphi survey will be discussed at the consensus meeting and the
12 main discussion will be regarding the outcomes deemed as achieving “no consensus” in the
13 Delphi survey. Participants at the meeting will vote on these outcomes. The same criteria for
14 consensus used in the Delphi survey **(Table 4)** will be used in the consensus meeting. All
15 outcomes that reach “consensus in” will be included in the core outcome set. All outcomes in
16 the “consensus out” or “no consensus” category after voting in the consensus meeting will not
17 be included in the core outcome set. If there is no agreed final core outcome set at the end of
18 the first meeting subsequent meetings will be arranged for this to happen. The participants
19 who had completed both rounds of the Delphi survey would be invited to attend another
20 consensus meeting if required.
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34 **PATIENT INVOLVEMENT**

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38 Patients will be involved in the design, review and recruitment of the study. The scope of the
39 research question will be decided with the study team that includes 2 research partners who
40 are patients with CES. The qualitative interviews will be trailed with the patient research
41 partners and the topic guide will be reviewed by them. Pilot testing of the Delphi survey will be
42 done by the patient research partners who will be asked to review the patient explanations of
43 the outcomes and the questions on the registration page. Patients will be involved in the
44 recruitment stage of the Delphi as they will be requested via social media to forward the
45 website link for the Delphi survey to any relevant known contacts.
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54 **ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION**

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5 REC and HRA approval was obtained on the 6 December 2016 for the qualitative interviews
6 from South Central - Hampshire A Research Ethics Committee. REC reference 16/SC/0587. REC
7 and HRA approval was obtained on 26 March 2018 for the Delphi process and consensus
8 meeting from North West- Greater Manchester Central Research Ethics Committee. REC
9 reference was 18/NW/0022. We intend to publish the results of the core outcome set for
10 patients with CES in an open access journal. It will also be made available through the CES
11 patient charity websites. Results will be disseminated through International and national
12 presentations. The next step would be to identify the appropriate measurement instrument for
13 each of the outcomes in the core outcome set ⁴⁵. Core outcome sets are developed in a number
14 of clinical areas and their use is advocated in the UK by the National Institute for Health
15 Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment (HTA), Cochrane Reviews of the effects of
16 Healthcare intervention ⁴⁶ and by World Health Organisation (WHO) handbook for guideline
17 development ¹⁷. The NIHR HTA has added this statement to their application form, "Where
18 established core outcomes exist they should be included among the list of outcomes unless
19 there is a good reason to do otherwise." By developing the CES core outcome set we intend to
20 reduce outcome reporting bias, heterogeneity, and improve the quality of research studies in
21 CES. This will allow us to synthesise the data and make more robust evidence based decisions
22 regarding the management of CES.
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40 **Author Contributions**

41 NS, MW, SC conceived the project. TM is the principal investigator for the study. NS is the
42 clinical research fellow responsible for management of the project, wrote the protocol and
43 manuscript. TM, PW, AN, MW, SC provide supervision, have input in all aspects of the project,
44 commented on drafts of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.
45 Special thanks to Ms Claire Thornber and Mr Steven Smith as patient research partners in this
46 study.
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Competing Interests

None Declared

Supplementary file 1- Topic guide

Figure 1. The overall study timeline

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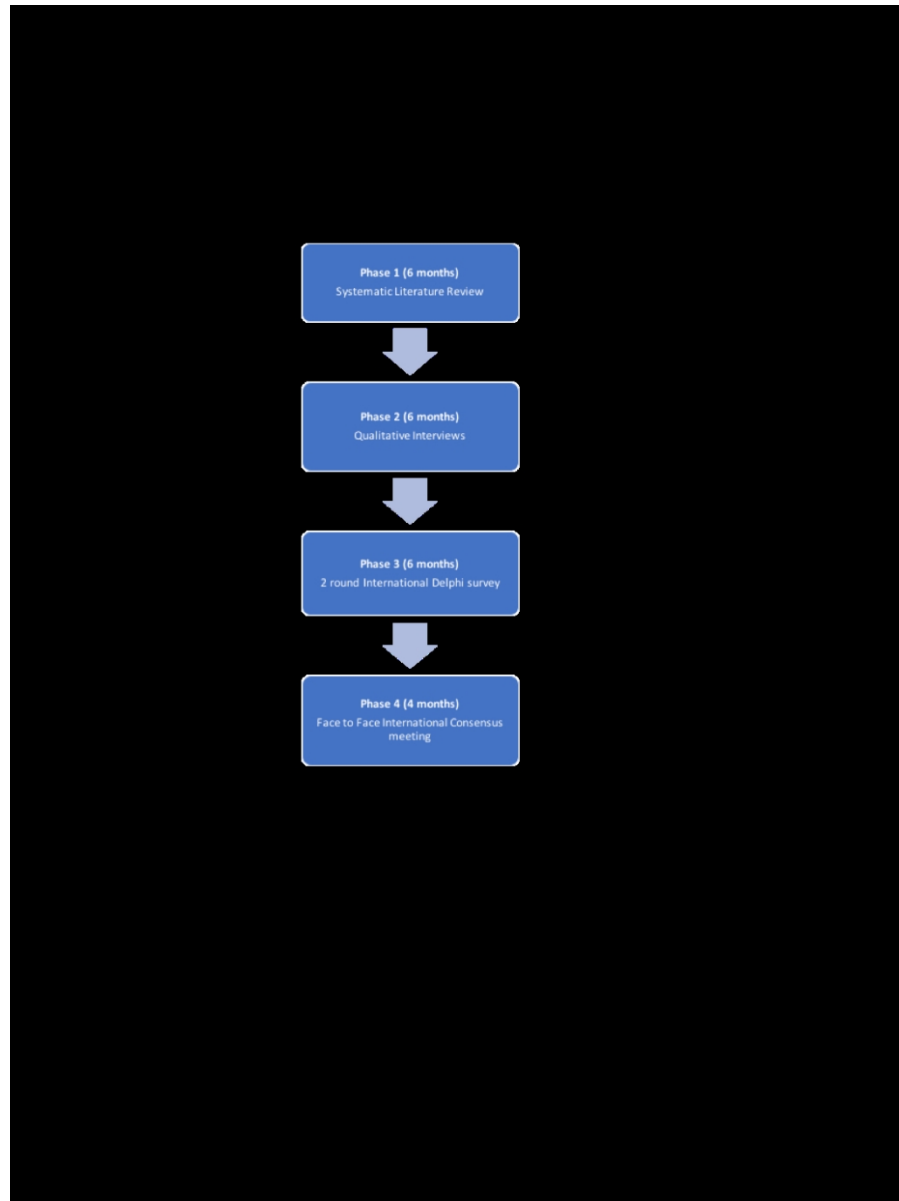


Figure 1. The overall study timeline

TOPIC GUIDE CES QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Aims and Objectives

- To explore the patient experience of living with Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES)
- To ascertain what the patient feels are the most important outcomes that they are experiencing
- To ascertain what outcomes the patient feels are the most important to research in to improve CES management and aftercare
- To determine who should be key stakeholders
- Identify appropriate language to use for patient Delphi iterative process.

Introduction (5-10 mins)

Interviewer Name

Interviewer Occupation

Explain basic definition of CES

Explain looking for challenges experienced after the operation for CES

Explain expected intention, sensitive subjects and duration of interview and confidentiality

Confirm consent to qualitative interview

Background (<5 mins)

Interviewee name

Interviewee age

Interviewee occupation

Other medical conditions

When was your operation for CES?

Interview questions (30 mins)

How has your experience of this condition; Cauda Equina Syndrome been?

- What was it like before the back operation?

- What was it like after the back operation?

How do you feel your condition has been managed in hospital and in the community?

What were your expectations of life health-wise after the operation and what is the reality like?

IRAS: 201946 Version: 1.1 Date: 23/09/16

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3 Due to this condition what do you feel are the challenges to your health and
4 wellbeing?

- 5 -bowel/bladder
6
7 -sex life
8
9 -back/ leg pain
10
11 -psychological
12
13 -anxiety/fear
14
15 -other

16
17 Would you be able to prioritise the importance of these for you now?

18
19 Was the importance of these different at earlier stages of the condition? (More
20 relevant to those in the long term CES category)

21
22 Through this process of living with CES who else do you think has a good handle
23 on the condition? If anyone? -Gauge other potential key stakeholders

24
25 Tell me a bit about the support you had for the condition?

26
27 **Closing remarks (5 mins)**

28
29 Considering your hospital, post op and follow up experience what would you
30 have liked to change?

- 31 -support services
32
33 -more streamlined service with dedicated clinics
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35 -research into timing for CES operations
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37 -follow up as to the effects of long term CES

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39 Offer the opportunity for the participant to comment on their interview
40 transcript after transcription.
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BMJ Open

PROTOCOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CORE OUTCOME SET FOR CAUDA EQUINA SYNDROME: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS, DELPHI SURVEY AND CONSENSUS MEETING

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Primary Subject Heading:	Neurology
Secondary Subject Heading:	Medical management, Patient-centred medicine, Qualitative research, Research methods, Surgery
Keywords:	Cauda Equina Syndrome, Core Outcome Set, Delphi, Systematic Literature Review, Qualitative Interviews, Consensus

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

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3 **PROTOCOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CORE OUTCOME SET FOR CAUDA EQUINA**
4 **SYNDROME: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW, QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS, DELPHI**
5 **SURVEY AND CONSENSUS MEETING**
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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES) is a serious neurological condition most commonly due to compression of the lumbosacral nerve roots, which can result in significant disability. The evidence for acute intervention in CES is mainly from retrospective studies. There is heterogeneity in the outcomes chosen for analysis in these studies, which makes it difficult to synthesise the data across studies. This study will develop a core outcome set for use in future studies of CES, engaging with key stakeholders and using transparent methodology. This will help ensure that relevant outcomes are used in future, and will facilitate attempts to summarise data across studies in systematic reviews.

Methods and Analysis

A systematic literature review will document all the outcomes for CES after surgery mentioned in the literature. The qualitative interviews with CES patients will be semi structured, audio recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed with the use of NVivo version 10 to identify outcomes and determine the themes described. The outcomes from the literature review and patient interviews will be combined and prioritised to determine what the most important outcomes are in CES research studies to patients and healthcare professionals. The prioritisation will be done through a two-round iterative Delphi survey and a consensus meeting. This process will decide the core outcome set for patients with CES.

Ethics and Dissemination

REC and HRA approval was obtained on the 6/12/16 for the qualitative interviews from South Central - Hampshire A REC. REC reference 16/SC/0587. REC and HRA approval was obtained on 26/3/18 for the Delphi process and consensus meeting from North West- Greater Manchester Central REC. REC reference was 18/NW/0022. The final core outcome set will be published and freely available.

Registration Details

This study is registered with the Core Outcome Measures in Effectiveness Trials (COMET) database as study 824.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

- A systematic literature review following PRISMA guidelines will identify outcomes in the existing literature for Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES).
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews using a sampling frame to select a varied sample of CES patients will identify outcomes important to them.
- The consensus process of an international online Delphi survey and an international face to face consensus meeting will involve patients and healthcare professionals.
- A core outcome set will allow future CES research studies to use outcomes relevant to key stakeholders and allow synthesis of data in CES.
- The outcomes that constitute the core outcome set will be reported. “How” these outcomes are measured will not be determined in this study and requires further work.

INTRODUCTION

Cauda equina syndrome (CES) is due to dysfunction of the lumbosacral nerve roots beneath the conus medullaris resulting in sensory-motor deficits of the lower limbs and sphincter dysfunction. Symptoms and signs include low back pain, unilateral or bilateral sciatica, saddle anaesthesia and motor weakness of the lower extremities with bladder and/or bowel dysfunction^{1 2}. The most common cause of CES is a herniated lumbar disc, and represents 2% of all herniated lumbar discs. CES has an incidence of 2 per 100,000 in England and is an indication for emergency decompression surgery^{3 4 5}. Other less common etiologies include spinal stenosis, spinal tumours, hematomas, fractures, and infections². The National Spinal Task Force showed that there are 981 operations done each year for CES in the UK from 2010 to 2011⁶. Surgical intervention for CES is not a rare procedure and the economic burden of severe disability is a worrying unknown for both patient quality of life and development of appropriate health services.

The evidence for acute intervention in CES is mainly from retrospective studies^{7 8}. The importance of categorising CES into CES incomplete (CESI) and CES complete with urinary retention (CESR) has been highlighted in the literature⁴. CESR describes painless urinary

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3 retention with overflow incontinence and complete perianal sensory loss. When the patient
4 complains of CESI, the symptoms include urinary issues of neurogenic origin including loss of
5 desire to void, altered urinary sensation, and hesitancy with partial saddle anaesthesia.
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10 It is documented in the literature that timely operative decompression for CES secondary to
11 herniated lumbar disc can lead to improved outcomes in patients^{9 7 8}. In fact, delay or
12 missed diagnosis of this condition incurs heavy litigation costs to the NHS at £336,000 (US
13 \$549,427) per case on average¹⁰ as reported to the Medical Defence Union in the UK.
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19 **Rationale for the development of a “Core Outcome Set” (COS)**

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22 An “outcome” in relation to clinical research studies is defined to be a measurement or
23 observation used to capture and assess the effect of treatment such as assessment of the
24 side effects (risk) or effectiveness (benefits).¹¹
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29 Before the systematic literature review a scoping review was undertaken¹². It was identified
30 that there were no randomised controlled trials, many retrospective observational studies
31 and few prospective studies reporting the clinical outcome of patients with CES. There is
32 heterogeneity and inconsistency in the outcomes reported in the literature for CES. The
33 outcomes reported in the literature have not been independently validated as important to
34 key stakeholders.
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40 There is no defined core outcome set in cauda equina syndrome (CES) currently and this
41 protocol will describe the methods of how to develop it. A core outcome set defines the
42 minimum outcomes that should be consistently measured and reported in clinical trials in a
43 specific area of healthcare¹³. With this there will be greater reporting consistency and a
44 reduction in outcome reporting bias in healthcare studies contributing to systematic reviews
45 and meta-analysis¹⁴ that can lead to informed healthcare decisions.
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51 Initially, a systematic literature review and qualitative patient interviews will be conducted
52 to document the outcomes for CES patients after surgery. These outcomes will be combined
53 and prioritised through two rounds of a Delphi process with key stakeholders and a
54 consensus meeting to decide the core outcome set. The core outcome set would be
55 published and used for future research studies and improving outcome reporting in CES.
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The development of core outcome sets has been done successfully in rheumatology with the OMERACT group (Outcomes Measures in Rheumatoid Arthritis Clinical Trials). This international collaboration was developed in the early 1990s involving patients in the development of core outcome sets and has improved consistency of reported trials in this speciality^{14 15}. The Core Outcome Measures in Effectiveness Trials (COMET) initiative advocates the involvement of patients and currently holds a database of on-going core outcome set developers¹⁶ to minimise duplication and foster health service user engagement^{13 17}.

Scope of the COS

We aim to identify “what” outcomes of patients with CES are of concern to key stakeholders using transparent methodology. We are not intending to consider how these outcomes should be measured. The 11 minimum Core Outcome Set Standards for Development (COS-STAD) recommendations are addressed in this protocol¹⁸ (**Table 1**).

Table 1. COS-STAD recommendations

Domain	Standard Number	Methodology	Notes
Scope Specification	1	The research or practice setting in which the COS is to be applied	Research studies that will inform clinical decision making
	2	The health condition(s) covered by the COS	All severities of Cauda Equina Syndrome
	3	The population(s) covered by the COS	Human adults aged 18 or above
	4	The intervention(s) covered by the COS	Clinical management of CES including surgery
Stakeholders involved	5	Those who will use the COS in research	Clinical trialists in CES are healthcare professionals who manage CES patients. They are included in standard 6.
	6	Healthcare professionals with experience of patients with the condition	This will include clinicians, experts and healthcare professionals involved in CES management

	7	Patients with the condition or their representatives	Patients with a diagnosis of CES will be included ¹⁹
Consensus Process	8	The initial list of outcomes considered both healthcare professionals and patients views	Systematic Literature review ²⁰ considered healthcare professional views. Qualitative interviews considered patient views.
	9	A scoring process and consensus definition were described a priori	Described in “Scoring” and “Analysis” section of this protocol
	10	Criteria for including/dropping/adding outcomes were described a priori	Described in “Analysis” section of this protocol
	11	Care was taken to avoid ambiguity of language used in the list of outcomes	Plain language and clinical explanations available. These will be pilot tested with patients and healthcare professionals.

Registration

The study is registered on the COMET database as study 824 (<http://www.comet-initiative.org/studies/details/824?result=true>).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Development of the core outcome set will be developed in four phases with their estimated time frames highlighted in the overall study timeline (**Figure 1**). Timeframes includes the estimated duration for ethical approval, study recruitment and analysis.

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

Research Question

What outcomes are reported in the medical literature after surgery for CES?

Summary

The aim of the systematic literature review was to summarise the reporting standards of the clinical outcomes after surgery in CES patients following the PRISMA guidelines²¹. Most CES cases are due to lumbar disc herniation²², which requires urgent surgical intervention.

Study inclusion was limited to articles with patients who were surgically managed and whose outcomes were recorded.

The systematic literature review summarised the outcomes that had been mentioned in the literature and categorised them into a known taxonomy²³. 1873 articles were identified through the search strategy of which 61 met the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria specified details regarding the study design, diagnosis, procedure, publication date, language and the patient age. 737 outcomes were reported verbatim in the 61 included articles. These were then categorised to 20 higher order groupings called "outcome domains." The most commonly reported outcomes were bladder function (70.5%), motor function (63.9%), and sensation (50.8%). There was significant variation in the terms used for each outcome for example, bladder function outcome domain had 141 different terms. Significant heterogeneity was evident in the outcomes reported in CES research studies. This highlighted a need for a core outcome set in CES to be developed.²⁰

Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews

Research Question

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3 What outcomes have CES patients experienced after surgery and how do they feel about
4 the management before and after surgery?
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8 9 **Method**

10 The objectives of the qualitative interviews with CES patients are:

- 11 • To explore the patient experience of living with CES.
- 12 • To document what the patient describes as the most important outcomes they are
- 13 experiencing.
- 14 • To determine what service improvements can be made to improve CES management
- 15 and aftercare.
- 16 • To determine who should be the key stakeholders in the Delphi survey.
- 17 • Identify appropriate language to use for the Delphi survey ²⁴.

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28 These interviews will be documented with audio recorded transcripts. The list of all
29 potential outcomes from the systematic review and qualitative interviews will be placed
30 into outcome domains by the research team to avoid repetition by qualitative method of
31 content analysis ²⁵. The qualitative interviews will be piloted with 2 CES patients to establish
32 if the interview structure and technique is clear, understandable, and capable of answering
33 the research questions. This would recognise any corrections that need to be made to the
34 interview structure or technique. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in **Table 2**.
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43 **Table 2.** Inclusion and Exclusion criteria for qualitative interviews

INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
Adult patients	Adults unable to consent for research
Diagnosis of Cauda Equina Syndrome	
Patient underwent a surgical procedure for CES	
Less than 10 years since the surgical procedure	
Ability to converse in English and to consent for research	

Participant Selection

Adult patients for the qualitative interviews will be selected from those coded as having a diagnosis of cauda equina syndrome in the medical records. There is an existing database of cauda equina patients who have been operated on and followed up by consultants, registrars or nurse specialists depending on the next available clinic. Adult patients will be 18 years or older who have had spinal surgery to remove the compressive lesion at a single tertiary NHS institution over the past 10 years. The qualitative interviews will capture short and long term outcomes that are deemed important to them. Duration of the recorded outcomes will be calculated since the initial operation for CES.

Stratified purposive sampling²⁶ was chosen in which the aim is to select groups that display variation in particular characteristics so the subgroups can then be compared.

Characteristics known to have an impact on the outcomes being investigated have been identified- severity of CES (CESI or CESR)²⁷ then there is a subgroup about which little is known and whose circumstances and views need to be explored; short (≤ 2 years) or long term (>2 years and ≤ 10 years) since the operation (see **Table 3**). This will produce 4 subcategories to populate. This is to prevent potential bias you may get from having many patients who presented with a severe clinical picture and poor outcomes being more forthcoming and vocal. All subcategories for the sampling frame will be deemed a priority. Half the participants would ideally be male and half would be female.

Table 3. Sampling frame with suggested quotas

	CESI (Cauda Equina Syndrome Incomplete)	CESR (Cauda Equina Syndrome with retention)
Short term since the operation (≤ 2 years)	10 participants	10 participants
Long term since the operation (>2 years ≤ 10 years)	10 participants	10 participants

There is an existing database of 200 patients with contact details and clinical details of presentation and management, which will be updated up to the current date to exclude patients who are deceased. This should produce 50 patients per category. Due to reasons

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3 such as long travel distance from institution, not interested in participating it is anticipated
4 that up to 10 patients may reply from each category, which would produce up to 40 patients
5 in total. Options will be given to be interviewed at home, via electronic media (Skype), over
6 the phone or to attend the hospital in person. After informed consent, patients will be
7 interviewed until “data saturation” is reached. The research team will decide when data
8 saturation is reached. Data saturation is the point where increasing the sample size no
9 longer contributes to new evidence ²⁸ moreover even large qualitative studies do not
10 interview more than 50 people ²⁹. Additional patients will be interviewed in the
11 subcategories if one group has a better response rate until data saturation is achieved.

12 Sticking rigidly to a sample frame could be counter-intuitive as one patient can be data rich
13 during the interview as opposed to interviewing 5 patients where data is not rich. The aim is
14 to collect rich data to allow in depth analysis ²⁸. So, although the sampling frame may serve
15 as a guide it will not be used to start restricting participants especially at the initial stages of
16 doing the qualitative interviews until data saturation is achieved.

17 An information leaflet and stamped addressed envelope to return the response slip will be
18 sent to participants with a consent form. Patients will have 3 weeks to “opt-out” of the
19 study by returning a response slip, through email or telephone with the research team.
20 After this the participants will receive a phone call from the research team to confirm
21 interest for participating in the study, to answer any further questions and to arrange a time
22 and location for the interview.

23 **Interview Format and Analysis**

24 A semi-structured interview format will be utilised as per our topic guide (**Supplementary**
25 **file 1**). Qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen over questionnaires and focus
26 groups as it was believed that patient opinions over sensitive subject matter such as bowel,
27 bladder and sexual function would be better elicited in a private one to one interview and
28 they were less likely to inhibit their contribution ²⁸. In addition, one-to-one interviews are
29 more accessible for potential participants and for patients with mobility restrictions.
30 Informed consent will be obtained prior to the interview where anonymity and
31 confidentiality will be expressed. The consent will also request the patient’s permission for
32 their general practitioner (GP) to be informed of their involvement in the study. This is so
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3 that if there is any distress during the patient interviews, which requires medical
4 management they can be referred to their GP. Open-ended non-leading questions on their
5 diagnosis, management post operatively in hospital and management in the community will
6 be asked allowing the participant to describe their experiences without unnecessary
7 interruption²⁹. Discussion will be directed towards outcomes of importance to the patient
8 as seen in the topic guide. The interviewer will not discuss their own opinions about CES and
9 if these are asked they will be answered at the end of the interview session. Reflexivity is an
10 important concept during qualitative research for striving towards objectivity and
11 neutrality²⁸ and the analysis of the interviews will consider if bias from the interviewer's
12 own beliefs may have crept in. It is anticipated that the interview will last for 45 minutes to
13 an hour at each sitting to prevent the participant feeling fatigued. The same interviewer
14 (NS) will be used for all the patient interviews. All interviewees will be made aware that the
15 interviewer is a doctor not involved in their on-going care. A sample of the transcripts will
16 be reviewed by a supervisor not involved in the qualitative interviews to confirm that they
17 were undertaken in a satisfactory manner.

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19 Initially, the transcripts will be reviewed to start identifying which outcomes are important
20 to the patients by labelling the data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software version
21 10. A pragmatic approach will be taken by using thematic analysis as per the Braun and
22 Clarke method³⁰. It is a pattern-based qualitative method like grounded theory³¹ and
23 interpretative phenomenological analysis³² but is not linked to a specific theoretical
24 framework. This method will allow summarisation of the key outcomes of each individual
25 transcript and overall themes whilst retaining the context and language in which it was
26 expressed²⁸. The qualitative interviews will be reported as outlined by the consolidated
27 criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ); a 32 item checklist³³.

48 49 ***Phase 3: The Delphi Survey***

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52 The outcomes from the systematic literature review and qualitative interviews will create a
53 long list¹¹. This will be condensed by grouping similar outcomes into domains and
54 conforming with the taxonomy used in the systematic literature review^{20 23}. This will be
55 reviewed and agreed by the study team and pilot tested with the key stakeholders before
56 the Delphi survey is distributed.
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Research Question

Which outcomes do patients and healthcare professionals think should be included in a core outcome set for patients with CES?

Method

All patients with CES will be invited to participate in the Delphi survey regardless of whether they had had surgery or not. Although there are a minority of participants in the category of non-operative management of CES³⁴ it was decided by the study team that including them will be an opportunity to consider their input and maximise recruitment. The Delphi will be done by healthcare professionals and patients.

To achieve a priority list, we will use the “modified” Delphi method³⁵ as opposed to the “traditional” Delphi method³⁶. Traditionally in a Delphi survey patients are asked open questions in the first round of the Delphi and the answers would constitute the outcomes rated in the second round. In the “modified” Delphi, which will be used in this study, rating the outcomes will take place over two rounds. A list of outcomes previously attained from the systematic literature review and qualitative interviews will be presented in the first round of the Delphi³⁵. Patients can also suggest outcomes that have not been mentioned in the first round but these will not be scored. They will be considered for inclusion into the second round of the Delphi if, as judged by the CES study team, the outcome does not reflect or is not similar to another outcome already listed. The CES study team includes a patient representative.

The level of anonymity will be “fully anonymised”³⁷ so participants do not know the identities of other individuals in the group and they will not know the specific answers other individuals give. In round 2 of the Delphi, participants will know the group responses from the patient group and the healthcare professional group. Individual participants can decide to keep their original rating or to change their rating in the next round. This will lead to the group converging on a consensus opinion over the course of these two rounds³⁷.

Inclusion criteria

Participants will be recruited from two key stakeholder groups: patients and healthcare professionals. All participants will be adults over 18 years of age and able to complete an

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3 online survey in the English language.

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5 *Patients*- Participants who have had an operation for CES.

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7 *Healthcare Professionals*- All members of the clinical team involved in directly caring for a
8 patient with CES such as:

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- Spinal surgeons
 - Spinal specialist nurses
 - Neuro-rehabilitation doctors

18 **Sampling and Recruitment**

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20 *Patients*- At the main site the clinical care team have a pre-existing database of CES patients
21 they have clinically managed. The clinical care team will send an invitation letter to the
22 home address of these patients. There will be no follow up calls or further correspondence.
23 It is the patient's decision if they wish to be involved and the invitation will contain details of
24 the website address patients can access if they wish to find out more details regarding the
25 study. Online patient groups for CES will be contacted internationally. A named contact for
26 each group will act as the liaison member to circulate the participant invitation email and
27 poster. This may include the patient groups sharing the recruitment details on social media.
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37 *Healthcare Professionals*- The main study site has spinal MDT (multi-disciplinary team)
38 meetings held weekly. The coordinator has a pre-set mailing list that goes to healthcare
39 professionals involved in the meeting. This will be used to send the participant invitation
40 email. The membership of national and international associations will be contacted and
41 invited to participate. They include different healthcare professionals in their membership
42 categories. Some examples are listed below:
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- Society of British Neurological Surgeons (SBNS)
 - British Association of Spine Surgeons (BASS)
 - World Federation of Neuro-rehabilitation (WFNR)
 - Spinal Injuries Association (SIA)

55 Known contacts of the CES study group will be contacted and invited to participate.

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57 Snowballing sampling will be used to increase the sample size. The participant invitation
58 email/ letter will be the first contact for healthcare professionals and patients, which is a
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3 short introduction and summary of the study. If they are interested further the participant
4 can proceed to the registration website for further details and obtain a copy of the
5 participant information leaflet.
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10 **Sample Size**

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12 There are no strict recommendations for the number of participants (patients and
13 healthcare professionals) required in a Delphi study to gain consensus³⁷. In general, having
14 more participants will increase the reliability of the group judgement³⁸. A pragmatic
15 approach to sample size will be taken and all individuals who meet the inclusion criteria as
16 identified above will be invited to participate. The recruitment phase will be 2 months
17 before the first round of the Delphi survey is released. Documentation of the organisations
18 who distribute the Delphi invitation from each stakeholder group will be recorded. No
19 further participants will be invited after the first round of the Delphi.
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29 **Consent**

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31 Consent will be implicit by the participant (patients and healthcare professionals) registering
32 their name and email address to take part in the Delphi survey via the website.
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36 **Questionnaires**

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38 The questionnaire is constructed and delivered in an online format using the DelphiManager
39 software developed by the COMET initiative. Before starting the questionnaire, the
40 participant will be asked to clarify which of the two stakeholder groups they belong to. For
41 each stakeholder group, specific information will be collected:
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- 45 • *Patients*- Age, gender, location, surgery for CES- yes/no, years since surgery for CES,
46 employed- full time/ employed- part time/ unemployed
 - 47 • *Healthcare professionals*- Practicing Field (spinal surgeon, specialist nurse, neuro-
48 rehabilitation etc), years in practice, location, gender
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54 Following confirmation of their eligibility to participate in the study, participants will be sent
55 an on-line link to access the first round of the Delphi process. Instructions of how to
56 complete the questionnaire will be included at the beginning of each round. Only
57 participants who respond to the 1st round of the Delphi will be invited to participate in 2nd
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3 round taking the assumption that if they had not participated in the first round they would
4 be unwilling to participate in the second round. Data will be collected over at least a 4-week
5 period for each round of the Delphi process. Participants who have not completed the
6 survey will be sent reminders via email when they have 2 weeks, 1 week and 48 hours
7 remaining for completion of the survey. Participants who have not completed the
8 questionnaire within 4 weeks of the start will be deemed not to have completed that round
9 of the Delphi. The language used by patients in the qualitative interviews will be used to
10 help term the outcomes for the Delphi. Plain language summaries by the COMET Patient
11 Participation, Involvement and Engagement (PoPPiE) group was used to develop the Delphi
12 information sheet. The Delphi will be piloted with 2 participants from each stakeholder
13 group to highlight any issues with understanding or validity.
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25 **Scoring**

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27 For an outcome to be included in the core outcome set there must be a majority agreement
28 of the critical importance of the outcome and minority agreement that the outcome is not
29 important³⁹. This is in par with the GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment,
30 Development and Evaluation) working group recommendations
31 (<http://www.gradeworkinggroup.org>;^{40 41}. At the beginning of the Delphi, participants will
32 be reminded the importance of completing the entire Delphi process. Round one of the
33 Delphi study we will ask participants to rate each outcome using a 9 point Likert scale. This
34 scoring system was chosen after previous studies and expert databases showed it
35 differentiates the most between questionnaire items^{16 37}. 7-9 indicates critical importance.
36 4 to 6 represents outcomes that are important but not critical whilst 1 to 3 are deemed to
37 be of limited importance. All outcomes will be carried through to second round with
38 anonymised feedback of first round scores from the patient group and from the healthcare
39 professional group displayed for each outcome. The feedback will show the cumulated
40 scores from each stakeholder group for each outcome and the participant will be asked to
41 rate the outcomes again using the same 9 point Likert scale. If they change their score on
42 the second round they will have the opportunity to explain their reasoning for this.
43 Outcomes which have been suggested in round 1 by the participants and deemed
44 appropriate by the study group will then be entered in for rating in the second round by key
45 stakeholders. After the final Delphi round, there will be a list developed from all stakeholder
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groups, which will be submitted to a face to face consensus meeting of key stakeholders to discuss what outcomes that should be finally included in the core outcome set. All participants who had completed both rounds of the Delphi survey will be eligible for invitation to the consensus meeting. A trained independent facilitator would chair this meeting.

Analysis

Consensus that an outcome should be included in the core outcome set is defined as 70% or more scoring it as 7 to 9 and fewer than 15% scoring it as 1 to 3, which is has been seen to be successful with the development of other core outcome sets^{42 43} (**Table 4**). This will be done for each stakeholder group. Results at the multiple rounds of the Delphi process and consensus meeting will be documented to include the number of participants invited, number completing the section, measure of each group response to an outcome leading to a comprehensive list of all outcomes that should be included in the COS CES.

Table 4. Definitions of a consensus

Classification of consensus	Description	Definition
IN	Consensus that outcome should be included in the core outcome set	70% or more participants scoring as 7 to 9 AND <15% participants scoring as 1 to 3 in both stakeholder groups
OUT	Consensus that outcome should not be included in the core outcome set	50% or less participants scoring 7 to 9 in both stakeholder groups
NO CONSENSUS	Uncertainty about importance of outcome	Anything else

Attrition

It is expected that some participants will drop out after each round of the Delphi. Each participant will be given a unique participant number when they complete the first round of

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3 the Delphi, which will allow calculation of the attrition rates between rounds. This will allow
4 identification of participants who have completed all rounds and see if there is any
5 difference bias between those participants who complete the process. Mean round 1 scores
6 for the participants who completed round 1 and round 2 will be compared with those that
7 dropped out after round 1.
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14 ***Phase 4: Consensus Meeting***

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17 All participants registering for the Delphi survey will be asked if they would be happy to
18 attend a face to face consensus meeting involving patients and healthcare professionals.
19 They will need to complete both rounds of the Delphi survey to be eligible to attend. This
20 would be set up as a tick box on the registration page for the online Delphi.
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22 40 participants will be invited to the consensus meeting. This will include 20 healthcare
23 professionals and 20 patients. Out of the 40 participants; 30 will be from the UK and 10 will
24 be international. Standard travel expenses and hotel accommodation will be reimbursed or
25 provided. 10 of the participants at the consensus meeting will be invited before the Delphi
26 survey is released to attend the consensus meeting but on the premise, that both rounds of
27 the Delphi are completed. This is to make sure there is representation at the consensus
28 meeting from key stakeholder organisations closely involved with CES patients, research or
29 management. 30 participants at the consensus meeting will be those who have completed
30 both rounds of the Delphi and ticked their interest to attend the consensus meeting during
31 registration.
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45 In the development of a breast reconstruction core outcome set patients and professionals
46 were recruited in a 2:1 ratio so that patients' views were represented preferentially as the
47 procedure is a patient selected optional intervention⁴⁴. In our study, clinical intervention for
48 cauda equina syndrome is performed as an emergency so it was deemed appropriate by the
49 study team to have a 1:1 ratio of patients and healthcare professionals. This is to maximise
50 the number of participants involved to help achieve consensus. In addition, the core
51 outcome set should reflect all key stakeholders input equally. If there is an overwhelming
52 response with more than 40 participants interested in attending the consensus meeting the
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3 study team will apply stratified purposive sampling. On the day of the consensus meeting
4 informed consent will be obtained from the patient participants.
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7 Outcomes categorised as “consensus in” across both stakeholder groups from the Delphi
8 survey (**Table 4**) will be included in the final core outcome set. Outcomes categorised as
9 “consensus out” across both stakeholder groups from the Delphi survey will be excluded
10 from the final core outcome set. Results of the Delphi survey will be discussed at the
11 consensus meeting and the main discussion will be regarding the outcomes deemed as
12 achieving “no consensus” in the Delphi survey. Participants at the meeting will vote on these
13 outcomes. The same criteria for consensus used in the Delphi survey (**Table 4**) will be used
14 in the consensus meeting. All outcomes that reach “consensus in” will be included in the
15 core outcome set. All outcomes in the “consensus out” or “no consensus” category after
16 voting in the consensus meeting will not be included in the core outcome set. If there is no
17 agreed final core outcome set at the end of the first meeting subsequent meetings will be
18 arranged for this to happen. The participants who had completed both rounds of the Delphi
19 survey would be invited to attend another consensus meeting if required.
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32 **PATIENT INVOLVEMENT**

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36 Patients will be involved in the design, review and recruitment of the study. The scope of
37 the research question will be decided with the study team that includes 2 research partners
38 who are patients with CES. The qualitative interviews will be trailed with the patient
39 research partners and the topic guide will be reviewed by them. Pilot testing of the Delphi
40 survey will be done by the patient research partners who will be asked to review the patient
41 explanations of the outcomes and the questions on the registration page. Patients will be
42 involved in the recruitment stage of the Delphi as they will be requested via social media to
43 forward the website link for the Delphi survey to any relevant known contacts.
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52 **ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION**

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56 REC and HRA approval was obtained on the 6 December 2016 for the qualitative interviews
57 from South Central - Hampshire A Research Ethics Committee. REC reference 16/SC/0587.
58 REC and HRA approval was obtained on 26 March 2018 for the Delphi process and
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3 consensus meeting from North West- Greater Manchester Central Research Ethics
4 Committee. REC reference was 18/NW/0022. We intend to publish the results of the core
5 outcome set for patients with CES in an open access journal. It will also be made available
6 through the CES patient charity websites. Results will be disseminated through International
7 and national presentations. The next step would be to identify the appropriate
8 measurement instrument for each of the outcomes in the core outcome set ⁴⁵. Core
9 outcome sets are developed in a number of clinical areas and their use is advocated in the
10 UK by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment
11 (HTA), Cochrane Reviews of the effects of Healthcare intervention ⁴⁶ and by World Health
12 Organisation (WHO) handbook for guideline development ¹⁷. The NIHR HTA has added this
13 statement to their application form, "Where established core outcomes exist they should be
14 included among the list of outcomes unless there is a good reason to do otherwise." By
15 developing the CES core outcome set we intend to reduce outcome reporting bias,
16 heterogeneity, and improve the quality of research studies in CES. This will allow us to
17 synthesise the data and make more robust evidence based decisions regarding the
18 management of CES.
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34 **Author Contributions**

35 NS, MW, SC conceived the project. AGM is the principal investigator for the study. NS is the
36 clinical research fellow responsible for management of the project, wrote the protocol and
37 manuscript. AGM, PRW, AJN, MW, SC provide supervision, have input in all aspects of the
38 project, commented on drafts of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the
39 manuscript.
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50 this study.
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56 Funds and The Royal College of Surgeons Research Fellowship.
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Competing Interests

None Declared

Supplementary file 1- Topic guide

Figure 1. The overall study timeline

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The overall study timeline in four phases with the estimated timeframes.

90x90mm (300 x 300 DPI)

IRAS: 201946 Version: 1.1 Date: 23/09/16

TOPIC GUIDE CES QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Aims and Objectives

- To explore the patient experience of living with Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES)
- To ascertain what the patient feels are the most important outcomes that they are experiencing
- To ascertain what outcomes the patient feels are the most important to research in to improve CES management and aftercare
- To determine who should be key stakeholders
- Identify appropriate language to use for patient Delphi iterative process.

Introduction (5-10 mins)

Interviewer Name

Interviewer Occupation

Explain basic definition of CES

Explain looking for challenges experienced after the operation for CES

Explain expected intention, sensitive subjects and duration of interview and confidentiality

Confirm consent to qualitative interview

Background (<5 mins)

Interviewee name

Interviewee age

Interviewee occupation

Other medical conditions

When was your operation for CES?

Interview questions (30 mins)

How has your experience of this condition; Cauda Equina Syndrome been?

- What was it like before the back operation?

- What was it like after the back operation?

How do you feel your condition has been managed in hospital and in the community?

What were your expectations of life health-wise after the operation and what is the reality like?

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3 Due to this condition what do you feel are the challenges to your health and
4 wellbeing?

- 5 -bowel/bladder
6 -sex life
7 -back/ leg pain
8 -psychological
9 -anxiety/fear
10 -other
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12

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14 Would you be able to prioritise the importance of these for you now?
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16 Was the importance of these different at earlier stages of the condition? (More
17 relevant to those in the long term CES category)
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19 Through this process of living with CES who else do you think has a good handle
20 on the condition? If anyone? -Gauge other potential key stakeholders
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23 Tell me a bit about the support you had for the condition?
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25 **Closing remarks (5 mins)**
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27 Considering your hospital, post op and follow up experience what would you
28 have liked to change?
29

- 30 -support services
31 -more streamlined service with dedicated clinics
32 -research into timing for CES operations
33 -follow up as to the effects of long term CES
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36 Offer the opportunity for the participant to comment on their interview
37 transcript after transcription.
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