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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This short report presents the interim findings of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Skin's (APPGS) audit of waiting times for English dermatology patients. The exercise, conducted using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to CCGs and provider trusts, was designed not as a rigorous scientific survey, but as an experiment to try and source intelligence relating to the status of dermatology services and their capacity to deliver care within an increasingly pressurised environment.
- 1.2 A small targeted number of questions were asked with regards to the waiting times facing patients, the number of patients that were not receiving treatment within 18 weeks and the use of triaging services to manage demand in secondary care.
- 1.3 This audit revealed that whilst the average reported waiting times for patients were under the national target of 18 weeks, over 50% of trusts were breaching their 18 week targets. In addition, although routine referrals are broadly falling within the 18 week range, urgent referrals are suffering due to the pressure to meet targets for suspected skin cancers.
- 1.4 Anonymised results of the exercise will be published via the APPGS' website. We would strongly encourage interested parties to view this data, which demonstrates a stretched service. Whilst the results contained within this report warrant attention, they should be considered alongside the plethora of publications already in the public domain, many of which cover the workforce issue and related concerns regarding the lack of dermatological education for primary care health practitioners.
- 1.5 To quote the King's Fund May 2015 report on dermatology services:
"Dermatology represents an important part of NHS provision. There are approximately 13 million GP consultations for skin conditions a year and 716,830 new referrals and yet this important area is poorly understood and has received comparatively little attention. Commissioning has often been poor. Inadequate planning has left gaps in the workforce. The 40,000 GPs managing this workload have received little training in dermatology and there are only 650 consultants to advise them and provide the more specialist care".
- 1.6 It is the APPGS intention to further analyse these results, once all responses to the audit have been received. However, it is clear from our interim results that there is a need for investment in consultant trainee numbers alongside investment in primary care dermatological education.

2. THE TRUST AUDIT

- 2.1 The APPGS audited over 140 trusts in England that provide dermatology services, of which 77 replied.
- 2.2 The audit examined waiting times for urgent and routine patients. National operational standards state that 95% of non-admitted patients should be treated within 18 weeks. **However the audit found that 50% of respondents were not meeting this standard, with more than 5% of patients in these providers failing to receive treatment within 18 weeks.**
- 2.3 Breaking down the figures, it appeared that for the average provider, 9% of patients wait longer than 18 weeks for treatment. The average jumps to 14% when only considering the figures for trusts that were

breaching. Perhaps most concerning, for 2 trusts, 52.4% and 58.9% of patients did not receive treatment within 18 weeks.

- 2.4 Trusts were also asked to provide information on the time until their next available routine and urgent appointments. This provided a snapshot view of waiting times across England.
- 2.5 The average waiting time for routine referrals was reported to be 11 weeks. Whilst this falls well within the 18 week referral to treatment targets, at the time of the snapshot, **10% of trust were unable to offer a patient a routine appointment within 18 weeks.** In addition, 2.5% had waiting times over 30 weeks for a routine patient appointment.
- 2.6 Perhaps the most concerning finding however, was the waiting times facing patients in need of urgent treatment. Trusts reported that the average waiting time for an urgent referral was 4 weeks. **However at least 10% of trusts were unable to offer a patient an urgent referral appointment in less than 10 weeks.** 26% of trusts were unable to offer an urgent referral within 5 weeks. For 4% of these trusts, patients with an urgent referral waited on average 14 weeks for an appointment.
- 2.7 **In addition, 6% of trusts stated that they did not offer urgent appointments except for suspected skin cancer referrals.** However several trusts did explain that they would try to fit a patient within 2 weeks by overbooking clinics or offering urgent referrals cancelled appointment slots.

3. THE CCG AUDIT

- 3.1 The APPGS audited all 209 CCGs in England, of which 186 replied.
- 3.2 The audit revealed that commissioners are not yet fully monitoring the challenges facing dermatology services or taking action to help ease the pressure. This was most clearly seen through the lens of waiting times. **Over 62% of commissioners were unable to provide figures for the waiting times at their local trusts, although this should be a routine part of the assessment of their contracts.**
- 3.3 Additionally, CCGs appeared to be unaware of what methods had been introduced to help providers to manage demand. When questioned about the use of triage services to manage referrals, 16% of commissioners were unaware whether or not a triage system was in place.
- 3.4 Of the commissioners that were able to answer questions relating to triage, it appeared that 23% of commissioners did not have a referral triaging process in place. **Only 39% of commissioners were able to definitively answer that they did commission a triaging system,** of which roughly 35% commissioned triaging systems that were GP, GPwSI or consultant led.
- 3.5 Despite this, some commissioners had introduced innovative measures to help reduce demand on providers. These measures included introducing innovations such as tele dermatology to help prevent inappropriate referrals.
- 3.6 Both commissioners and providers were questioned about the number of inappropriate referrals. Whilst providers as a whole were unable to answer, select commissioners provided estimates on the numbers of patients that had been inappropriately referred to secondary care.
- 3.7 Figures showed that between 12 and 349 patients per year were sent inappropriately to secondary care. In isolation, these figures mean little, as their relevance is dependent upon the overall number of referrals. However, some commissioners did anecdotally state that providers were reporting a significant number of inappropriate referrals to secondary care for suspected skin cancer. This combined with the fact that several providers reported that they were only able to provide urgent referrals for suspect skin cancer, suggests that the need to meet the 2 week wait target is impacting upon other urgent referrals.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The All Party Parliamentary Group on Skin calls upon Health Education England to review the funding available for dermatology posts.
- The All Party Parliamentary Group on Skin upon Health Education England to review the dermatology training available to the primary care workforce.
- The All Party Parliamentary Group on Skin calls upon the Government to support Health Education England and NHS England in implementing these recommendations.