

CANCER SURGERY WAIT TIMES PROJECT

Background

The goals of Cancer Care Ontario (CCO) include improved integration and coordination of cancer care; development of a comprehensive cancer information system; and ongoing assessment of the quality of cancer services. A systematic plan of quality improvement involves the development of indicators for cancer disease sites, including those that measure access, appropriateness, and clinical and health-related quality of life, as well as the evaluation of practice patterns and outcomes based on those indicators.

Wait times for cancer treatment is an issue related to all of these concepts. The Surgical Oncology program first identified potentially lengthy waits for cancer surgery at hospitals affiliated with regional cancer centres in August 2001 (Simunovic et al. CMAJ 2001; 165:421-425). This prospective study involved 62 surgeons at eight regional cancer centres (including Princess Margaret Hospital) and 1,465 patients with breast, gynecologic, colorectal, head and neck, thoracic and urologic cancer.

The median wait time from referral to first visit was 11 days; from first visit to treatment decision 0 days; from treatment decision to surgery, 20 days and from surgery to receipt of the pathology report, eight days. The median wait times for the interval of referral-to-surgery and the interval of referral-to-receipt-of-pathology-report was 37 and 48 days, respectively.

The surgeons judged that 37% of patients had inappropriately long wait times for the referral-to-surgery interval. These waits were in excess of those recommended by the Canadian Society for Surgical Oncology and the National Health Service in the United Kingdom. Although there is little evidence that lengthy wait times influence clinical outcomes, they do contribute to patient anxiety and, hence, impact patient satisfaction and health-related quality of life.

Project Objective

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) has asked CCO to report on cancer surgery wait times. Currently, there is very limited reliable information available in Ontario. While CCO plans to implement a province-wide electronic system to capture data on all patients with cancer, this infrastructure will not be in place and functioning until 2006. In the interim, the Surgical Oncology program has launched a Cancer Surgery Wait Times project to lay the groundwork for province wide wait times monitoring. With current cancer surgery wait time data from across the province CCO can better advise the MOHLTC on issues of funding, capacity and human resources.

Project Description

Phase 1 is a pilot project involving a sample of eight hospitals in the Greater Toronto Area that have agreed to participate. The purpose of the pilot is to refine a process for the collection of wait time data on patients with suspected breast, colon, gynecologic, lung, and prostate cancer. The time intervals of interest will be median wait between each of the following time points: referral, first consultation, decision to operate, and actual date of operation.

CCO data collectors are currently working with administrative staff of participating surgeons at four hospitals. Of 60 eligible surgeons, 48 agreed to participate (80%) and are actively collecting data, with over 100 cases registered thus far. Eligible surgeons at the remaining four hospitals are in the process of being identified so that data collection can commence across all eight sample hospitals.

Phase I is expected to conclude by June 2004. The data obtained in the pilot project will be submitted to the MOHLTC with a request for support to enable expansion of the pilot project across the province (Phase 2). The intention is to extend the project to all hospitals once it can be demonstrated that wait time data can be reliably collected.