Media release
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More than ½ million RA patients let down by NHS

Damning report shows £8 billion RA services in disarray as Public Accounts Committee’s recommendations ignored

A new report launched today from Arthritis Care shows that care and services for over 500,000 RA patients remains hugely inadequate with poor rates of diagnosis and a lack of GP awareness undermining delivery of care – costing the UK £8 billion a year. Alarmingly, two thirds of the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee have not been implemented and such inefficiencies are leaving patients disillusioned with their care and with no guarantee that valuable NHS resources are being well spent.¹

Early diagnosis is the key to the successful treatment of rheumatoid arthritis but the Three wasted years report published today reveals that in England over 50% of patients have to visit their GP on more than three occasions before being referred to a rheumatology specialist for assessment and treatment – delaying access to appropriate care for this crippling condition. The report also reveals that over 90% of patients feel that the NHS is not doing enough to ensure the early diagnosis of RA.¹

Despite the call for reform from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the National Audit Office (NAO) three years ago, this report demonstrates that RA patients continue to be systematically and appallingly let down by the NHS. GPs’ knowledge of how to manage the condition continues to be limited, with over two thirds of clinicians and commissioners surveyed judging GP awareness and understanding of RA to be either ‘average’ or ‘poor’.¹ This results in poor diagnosis rates and widespread variations across the country.¹

Judith Brodie, Chief Executive, Arthritis Care said: “As the state of RA services has remained unchanged for three years, it is imperative that we take action now to improve care and services for people with RA. Today we are calling for the Government to introduce an action plan for arthritis, with clear and strong leadership from the centre, to enable people

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with arthritis in England to get access to the best available care and treatment. It is essential that in the new NHS, GP commissioners are supported and incentivised to deliver improvements in the quality of services available to people with RA.”

In addition, the report highlights that 75% of the healthcare professionals surveyed felt that RA services are not being sufficiently prioritised by the NHS and a third indicated that they face restrictions on treatment and care options when making prescribing decisions.¹

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) affects 580,000 adults in England and Wales¹ and the cost of the condition and its associated complications has been estimated to be £8 billion annually in the UK.² The prevalence and costs of RA are rising and musculoskeletal conditions are now the fourth highest area of NHS spend³ with arthritis being the biggest cause of physical disability in the UK.⁴

The Three wasted years report is based on the responses to a consultation undertaken by Arthritis Care the that sought the views of patients, clinicians and commissioners on the quality of RA services in their local area, including the information and support available to people with RA and whether they are getting access to the treatment and care they need to manage their condition. It also makes 20 policy recommendations aimed at improving outcomes for people with RA.

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Notes to Editors

Key report findings

Patients:

• Three quarters of patients believe that the NHS is failing to give enough priority to rheumatoid arthritis (RA) services.
• Over three quarters of RA patients rate the current level of public awareness of the condition as either ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.
• More than half of those patients surveyed had to visit their GP on more than three occasions before being referred to a rheumatology specialist for assessment and

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treatment, and another third needed to see their GP two or three times prior to a referral.

- Four out five of patients are still not receiving a personalised care plan based upon an assessment of their individual care needs.
- Fewer than 10% of respondents felt that the NHS is currently doing enough to ensure the early diagnosis of RA.
- Over half of respondents were dissatisfied with the number of follow-up appointments available to them.
- Almost 80% of patients felt that the information on the provision of additional support services, such as emotional and practical assistance was inadequate.
- Over 55% of patients judged that the access to care and support they had received had not been continuous across care settings.

**Clinicians and commissioners**

- Over 75% of respondents felt that RA services are not being sufficiently prioritised by the NHS.
- Over 70% of healthcare professionals felt that public awareness of RA remains ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.
- Over two thirds judged the awareness and understanding of GPs on RA to be either ‘average’ or ‘poor’.
- Two out of three healthcare professionals felt that efforts to ensure the early diagnosis of RA in the NHS are insufficient.
- Almost half of those questioned confirmed that they have encountered an increase in the referral times for people with RA following diagnosis.
- Three out of four respondents felt that there are currently insufficient follow-up appointments for people with RA.
- A third of healthcare professionals believe that they face restrictions on treatment and care options when making decisions on prescriptions.
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Report methodology

- The purpose of this consultation is to provide an assessment of the state of services for patients with rheumatoid arthritis in England and ascertain whether any progress had been made since the publication of the 2009 National Audit Office report, *Services for people with rheumatoid arthritis*. In addition, Arthritis Care wanted to seek the views of rheumatologists and commissioners on their perception of the awareness of symptoms and the quality of services.

- Arthritis Care invited individuals from both groups to respond to the online and paper surveys, which included a series of short questions on various aspects of care for patients with rheumatoid arthritis. In advance of answering the question, respondents were made aware that the results would be collated and written up into a short report.

- The consultation process commenced on 12 October 2011 and closed on 31 December 2011. During this period, Arthritis Care received 131 responses to the patient survey and 42 responses to the clinician survey. Those questioned were also invited to provide comments to allow them to elaborate upon their response and give anecdotal evidence of their experiences of care.

The report, *Three wasted years: evaluating progress in delivering improved rheumatoid arthritis services* can be downloaded from Arthritis Care’s website:

[http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk](http://www.arthritiscare.org.uk)

During Arthritis Awareness Week in May, Arthritis Care will publish results of the most comprehensive survey of people with osteoarthritis (OA). The OA Nation 2012 report will highlight the plight of the 8.5 million people in the UK with OA and the impact of this debilitating condition on everyday life.

Further Information:

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References:
1. Arthritis Care, *Three wasted years*: evaluating progress in delivering improved rheumatoid arthritis services April 2012

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