

Direct access to physiotherapy in the Netherlands

Objectives

In 2006, direct access to physiotherapy was introduced in the Netherlands. The objectives of the current study were to investigate how many patients use direct access, to establish whether these patients have a different profile than referred patient, to investigate whether self-referrals receive other treatment procedures, and to investigate what the motives are of the Dutch population and the physiotherapy patients for choosing for a referral or for direct access.

Methods

Data from the National Information Service for Allied Health Care (LiPZ) were used. LiPZ is an electronic registration network based on physiotherapists' medical records in which about 100 Dutch physiotherapists participate. These therapists enter data on their patients, referrals, complaints, treatments, and results in their practice software. Monthly, data is sent to the research institute. Yearly, information about over 15,000 patients is registered. In addition, during five months in 2006 physiotherapy patients from the LiPZ-network were asked to complete a questionnaire about their reasons for visiting a medical specialist first or for using direct access. A random sample of the Dutch population was asked to complete a questionnaire about their knowledge of direct access and the likeliness for using it.

Results

In 2007, 34% of the patients seen by a physiotherapist came by direct access; in 2006 this was 28%. Patients with nonspecific back or neck complaints, and higher educated patients were more likely to refer themselves to a physiotherapist, as were patients with health problems lasting for less than 1 month. Also younger patients made more use of direct access. Self-referrers received less treatment sessions than patients with a referral. Furthermore, in patients who came by direct access other treatment goals were set and other interventions were applied. Main reasons for using direct access were familiarity with the health problem or the physiotherapist and saving time. Patients visited general practitioners (GPs) first when they wanted GPs to have a good overview of all their health problems or when they wanted to have GP's advice or diagnosis.

Conclusion

The proportion of patients using direct access was higher than was expected on grounds of a pilot study. Furthermore, a specific group of patients used the option to visit a physical therapist without a referral. Apparently, the freedom of choice is appreciated and used by a large part of the patient population. However, still the majority of patients choose to visit a medical specialist first.