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Factors affecting the delay in presentation of inflammatory arthritis to specialty care- a cross-sectional study

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Introduction

Inflammatory arthritis is a common cause for patients to seek rheumatology clinic services. The international community is moving towards early diagnosis and early treatment to reduce long-term morbidity. However, a previous study by the authors showed that in Sri Lanka, there is still a significant delay in the presentation of patients with rheumatoid arthritis to specialty care.

Objectives

To investigate the factors affecting the delayed presentation of inflammatory arthritis to specialty care.

Methods

An interviewer-based study was conducted from April to August 2022 at the rheumatology clinic at Teaching Hospital Peradeniya. Newly diagnosed patients with inflammatory arthritis who consented to be interviewed, were included in the study. The diagnosis of inflammatory arthritis was made by CD who is an experienced consultant rheumatologist. Data on the length of time between symptom onset and first presentation to medical attention and the possible contributory factors were explored.

Results

Of the 61 patients interviewed, 51 were females. The mean age at presentation was 51 years and the mean duration of symptoms at presentation was 7.6 months (SD = 11.27). 32 (52.5%) patients presented late (after the first 3 months following symptom onset). Initial consultations were with general practitioners 37 (60.6%), outpatient department 18 (29.5%) and other specialists 6 (9.8%). 30 patients (49.2%) had rheumatoid arthritis, 24 (39.3%) had undifferentiated inflammatory arthritis and 7 (11.5%) had spondyloarthritis. The primary cause for the delay is non-referral from primary care which is statistically significant ($p = 0.003$). Type of inflammatory arthritis, large joint versus small joint onset, patient delay due to ignoring symptoms, non-referral from secondary care, use of ayurvedic treatment, educational status, employment status, income, age, gender and mistrust in allopathic medicine were assessed as potential causes for the delay but failed to show a statistically significant impact ($p > 0.05$).

Conclusions

There is a significant delay in patient presentation to specialty care in inflammatory arthritis. Non-referral from primary care is the main factor contributing to delay in presentation in the studied cohort. It is essential to intervene in the primary care setting to encourage timely presentation to rheumatology care.