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Overdiagnosis of asthma in adults in primary care

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Background & Aim: Asthma is a common chronic disease in Adults. According to international guidelines the diagnosis should be objectified with spirometry. In daily practice, however, the diagnosis is often based on patient history and physical examination. A previous study from our group showed that overdiagnosis of childhood asthma is common in primary care. This study aims to assess the extent of overdiagnosis of asthma in adults.

Methods: A retrospective analysis was carried out using routine care registration data in the Julius Health Centers (JHC), the academic primary care practices in Utrecht, The Netherlands, providing integrated multidisciplinary health care for 40.000 patients. All adults (>17 years of age) with the diagnosis asthma (ICPC code R96) were included. The diagnosis asthma was considered correct in case of recurrent dyspnea or wheezing, with reversible bronchial obstruction, objectified with lung function testing. The following data were collected from the medical files: age, sex, year of diagnosis, whether the diagnosis was established according to the guideline, number of exacerbations in the past year, use of chronic inhalation medication, type of medication and the amount of inhalation medication used.

Results: A total of 1522 adult patients with the diagnosis asthma were included, which is a prevalence of 6.1%. In all, 462 (29.6%) of these patients were overdiagnosed. In 51.1% (n=710) of the patients the diagnosis was confirmed according to the guidelines and 19.3% (n=300) probably have asthma but diagnosis was not confirmed according to the guidelines. A total of 831 patients (54.6%) use chronic inhalation medication but 21.3% (n=177) of them were not diagnosed properly.

Conclusion: One third of adults with the diagnosis asthma in primary care are overdiagnosed and a lot of these patients use chronic inhalation medication. In order to avoid overtreatment, medicalization and disease burden, a more structured diagnostic strategy is warranted.