

UK skin cancer care outcomes: A comparison with Europe

What is skin cancer?

Skin cancer is a cancer of the cells that pigment the skin (melanocytes). In skin cancer, when melanocytes become malignant they multiply excessively. In advanced skin cancer the tumour cells have spread to other parts of the body, making it difficult to treat, with treatments primarily aiming to reduce the size of the cancer or stop it spreading further.¹

Skin cancer is one of the fastest growing cancers in the UK. In 2014 around 15,400 people were diagnosed with skin cancer and 2,459 people died from the disease.² Incidence rates have more than quadrupled since the 1970s, rising faster than any of the ten most common cancers.

More than one third of all skin cancer cases occur in people aged under 60 and it is the second most common cancer in young adults aged 15-34.² Depending on how advanced the skin cancer is, treatments include surgical removal, radiotherapy, chemotherapy or biological therapy. If identified early, most skin cancers can be effectively treated.

This briefing provides an overview of skin cancer outcomes in the UK and Europe informed by the findings from the Institute of Health Economics' (IHE) *Comparator Report on Access to cancer medicines in Europe revisited*.³

UK patient outcomes for skin cancer



In comparison with Europe, the UK has the seventh highest incidence of skin cancer, standing at 19 per 100,000 people.³ This compares to the European average of 13 per 100,000. Mortality rates for skin cancer are also slightly higher in the UK at 2.6 per 100,000 compared to the European average of 2.2 per 100,000 people. However, the chances of surviving the cancer at five years after diagnosis are 3.3% higher than the European average of 83%.

In the last decade, skin cancer incidence in the UK has increased by 45%.² This increase particularly affected men who have seen a 56% increase in incidence.

Cancer incidence is increasing across the whole of Europe.³ The IHE report notes that demographic factors contribute to this increase. However, this alone does not explain the increasing incidence of skin cancer. Life styles choices such as increased exposure to sun or indoor tanning are considered to play a significant role in driving the number of cases, particularly in young people.⁴

Further improvements in the care and treatment of affected people are critical if the UK is to close the gap to the best performing countries in Europe.³



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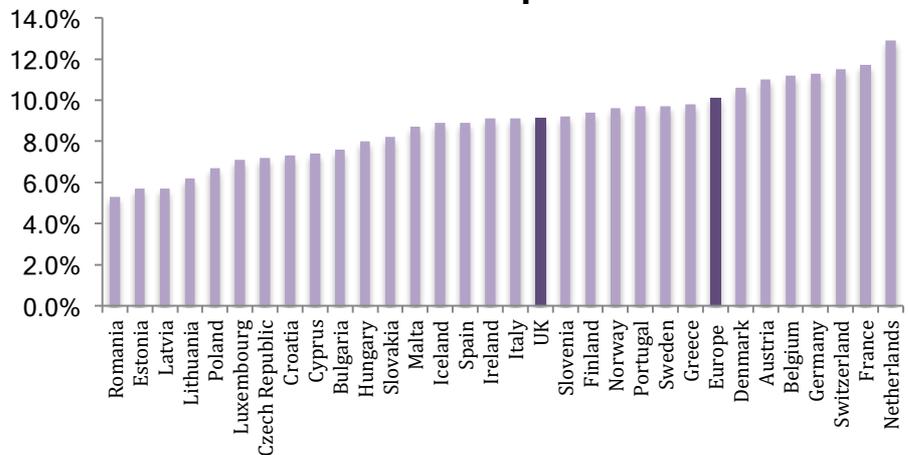
86% of people in the UK survive skin cancer for five years or more following diagnosis³

Early diagnosis and timely referral are vital given that most skin cancers are curable if detected and treated early. A third of patients in England are currently diagnosed via GP referral and 2% present as emergency cases.⁵ With new treatments being developed for advanced stages of skin cancer, timely access to treatments also plays a key factor in improving care for affected people.

Cancer spending

The UK's spending on healthcare, as well as on cancer specifically, falls below the European average. According to the IHE report, the UK's spend on healthcare as a percentage of GDP is 1% lower than the European average and per capita spending on cancer in the UK is €41 lower than the European average.³

Health spending as percentage of GDP, 2014³



The UK spends only 2% of its cancer budget on the care and treatment of people affected by skin cancer³

The UK spends 2% of its cancer budget on skin cancer.

The European comparison indicates that the UK is not spending its resources in the most efficient way.³ Countries such as Ireland and Malta are currently spending less per capita on health overall but nevertheless achieve better survival rates for skin cancer than the UK, suggesting that further improvements can be made in the way the UK utilises its healthcare resources.

The patient journey

Diagnosis

The most common route of diagnosis for skin cancer in England is to be diagnosed after a two week wait; 48% of patients are diagnosed in this way, which compares to an all cancer average of 30%.⁵ This is particularly important for skin melanoma given that the majority of stage 1 and stage 2 skin cancers can be cured by simply removing the affected lesion of the skin.

Access to new treatments



Traditionally, the UK's uptake of new medicines has been relatively low compared to other European countries, which has meant cancer patients in the UK have had fewer treatment options.³ This trend is mirrored in the case of skin cancer treatments, where uptake of medicines for the treatment of skin cancer, such as ipulimumab, lag behind other European countries such as Germany or France.

Recent developments, for example in newer types of biological therapies have increased treatment options. In some cases, these are offering the possibility of prolonged disease control for people with advanced disease. Since 2000 the UK has approved nine treatments for skin cancer through NICE, all of which have been approved from 2012 onwards, reflecting the recent developments in treatments for skin cancer.^{6,7}

The introduction of the Cancer Drugs Fund (CDF) has also contributed to better patient access to cancer treatments. However, recent changes to the CDF mean that it is difficult to assess whether this positive trend will continue into the future.

Patient experience

When compared to other cancers, patient experience with skin cancer in England presents a mixed picture.

According to the 2015 National Cancer Patient Experience Survey, which surveys over 100,000 cancer patients in England, skin cancer patients rated their speed of diagnosis and understanding of their condition as better than patients with other types of cancer.⁸

However, 12% of people with skin cancer stated that they were not aware of the treatment options available to them and only 16.9% of patients were asked whether they wanted to participate in research.⁸ These figures show that further improvements can be made in raising patients' awareness of available treatments and ongoing clinical trials.

“12% of people with skin cancer in England are not aware of the treatment options available to them”⁸

The future of skin cancer care

In the UK around 42 people are diagnosed with skin cancer every day.⁹ The comparison of the UK's patient outcomes in skin cancer with that of other European countries shows that further improvements can still be made in relation to funding of cancer services, patient access to treatment and encouraging patients to take part in research.

In order to ensure the system is ready to tackle the future challenges that the UK faces for skin cancer, it is important that:

- **Focus on early diagnosis** is maintained due to the higher chance of survival the earlier the skin cancer is treated

- **Information on treatments** is made clearer to patients so they are aware of the options available to them
- **Clarity on reimbursement and funding** for innovative treatments in the future is provided to ensure that the recent increase in access to new treatments continues apace

About this briefing

This briefing has been developed following the publication of the *Comparator Report on patient access to cancer medicines in Europe revisited* by the Swedish Institute for Health Economics. It aims to highlight the key findings of the report in relation to the UK's skin cancer outcomes in the European context. Whilst the briefing primarily draws on the findings of the report, it also brings together additional relevant data sources.

References

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