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**Development of a Cross-Site Rheumatology Referral System: Building Bridges Between Departments**

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**Background**

Newcastle NIHR Clinical Research Facility (CRF) currently runs a wide range of academic and commercial rheumatology clinical trials ranging from phase I to phase IV. Referrals are forwarded cross-site from the Musculoskeletal Unit (MSU) at Freeman Hospital, with patients approached and recruited from these referrals by a team of experienced CRF research nurses.

**Rationale**

Following cross-departmental discussions it was felt that the referral process for rheumatology clinical trials in the CRF needed streamlining. Points to be tackled included:

- To improve communications between the two departments
- To involve the MSU rheumatology team more in the recruitment process at the CRF
- To ensure patients are not "lost to follow-up" post-clinical trial
- To ensure a treatment "plan B" is implemented as quickly as possible should referred patients not be eligible or interested in currently recruited clinical trials
- To standardise the method of referral

It was hoped that implementing a plan to tackle these issues would improve confidence in the referral process, and in turn increase recruitment into the CRF rheumatology clinical trials.

**Methods**

A weekly CRF rheumatology coordination meeting was commenced. This was attended by a team consisting of one medical representative from the rheumatology department, one research nursing representative from the CRF and one research nursing representative from the rheumatology department. All referrals for rheumatology trials in the CRF were facilitated by this team, identifying potential trials, facilitating alternative care plans if not suitable for currently recruiting trials, and arranging continued care in the rheumatology department for patients who had completed/withdrawn from their trial. It was decided that patient referrals were to be sent in writing, and referring physicians were to be updated on the progress of the referral on a regular basis via email. Patients were invited to be kept on the CRF Rheumatology Clinical Trial Register for future trials should no suitable trials be currently recruiting. This process is demonstrated in figure 1.

**Success?**

- Communications between the two departments are now much improved, resulting in an increase in patient referrals.
- Patients are now being screened sooner, and continuity of care between the two departments has been enhanced.
- The new rheumatology referral system appears to have improved relationships between the two departments.
- It is planned to continue this collaboration, taking any suggestions or input from referring physicians as to how to improve the process further and implementing any changes as necessary.