

1.6 The effectiveness of triage, self-referral and direct access services for patients with musculoskeletal pain: a systematic review (Lay Summary).

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Pain in muscles and joints (musculoskeletal pain), in particular back pain, is globally the leading cause of disability. Musculoskeletal pain is also the reason for around 50 million healthcare consultations in the UK every year, and the second most common reason for requesting sick notes, resulting in 9.3 million lost working days every year. With the increasing age of the population, the demand for care for people with musculoskeletal pain is rising, and this is a growing challenge for general practitioners who are struggling to keep up with demand. One solution may be to offer direct access to physiotherapy and other healthcare services which may offer effective and efficient care for people with musculoskeletal pain. In over half of EU countries, most parts of the USA, and more recently also in an increasing number of regions in the UK, patients can self-refer to physiotherapists. Previous research has demonstrated benefit of direct access to musculoskeletal services, but have also identified some barriers to adoption. This includes the number of patients using such services; the belief that only medical doctors can independently diagnose and treat musculoskeletal problems; changes needed in legislation or qualification of healthcare professions, or changes needed in the organisation of healthcare.

The aim of this systematic review is to summarise evidence regarding the benefits of direct access to physiotherapy and other musculoskeletal services, on patient outcomes such as pain, disability, and work absence. The review will also summarise information from previous research regarding patient safety, for example whether direct access to musculoskeletal services more often leads to serious health conditions to be missed. Finally, the review will summarise information regarding the costs of care, to see if direct access leads to a reduction in the total number of healthcare consultations, number of drug prescriptions, additional tests (such as scans), or referrals to specialist doctors.