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# Rates and Associations of Australian General Practice Trainees' Vitamin D test ordering

**Amanda Tapley** Research Officer<sup>1</sup>, [Amanda.Tapley@gpvtvc.com.au](mailto:Amanda.Tapley@gpvtvc.com.au)

**Simon Morgan** General Practitioner and Medical Educator<sup>1</sup>, [Simon.Morgan@gpvtvc.com.au](mailto:Simon.Morgan@gpvtvc.com.au)

**Kim Henderson** Research Manager<sup>1</sup>, [Kim.Henderson@gpvtvc.com.au](mailto:Kim.Henderson@gpvtvc.com.au)

**John Scott** IT Officer<sup>1</sup>, [John.Scott@gpvtvc.com.au](mailto:John.Scott@gpvtvc.com.au)

**Allison Thomson** General Practitioner and Academic Trainee<sup>2</sup> [Allison.Thomson@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Allison.Thomson@newcastle.edu.au)

**Neil Spike** General Practitioner and Director of Medical Education and Training<sup>3</sup>, Clinical Professor<sup>4</sup>  
[Neil.Spike@vma.com.au](mailto:Neil.Spike@vma.com.au)

**Lawrie McArthur** General Practitioner and Medical Director<sup>5</sup>, Senior Lecturer<sup>5</sup>,  
[lawrie.mcarthur@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:lawrie.mcarthur@adelaide.edu.au)

**Mieke van Driel** General Practitioner and Professor of General Practice<sup>6</sup>, [m.vandriel@uq.edu.au](mailto:m.vandriel@uq.edu.au)

**Patrick McElduff** Associate Professor<sup>7</sup> [Patrick.Mcelduff@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Patrick.Mcelduff@newcastle.edu.au)

**Billie Bonevski** Associate Professor<sup>8</sup>, [Billie.Bonevski@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Billie.Bonevski@newcastle.edu.au)

**Parker Magin** General Practitioner and Medical Educator<sup>1</sup>, Conjoint Professor<sup>2</sup>,  
[Parker.Magin@gpvtvc.com.au](mailto:Parker.Magin@gpvtvc.com.au)

<sup>1</sup> General Practice Training Valley to Coast, PO Box 573, HRMC NSW 2310, Australia, +61249686753

<sup>2</sup> University of Newcastle, Discipline of General Practice, Newbolds Building, University Drive, Callaghan, NSW, 2308, Australia, +61249686797

<sup>3</sup> Victorian Metropolitan Alliance General Practice Training, 15 Cato Street, Hawthorn, VIC, 3122, Australia, +61398221100

<sup>4</sup> Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne, 200 Berkeley Street, Carlton, Victoria, 3053, Australia, +61383447276

<sup>5</sup> Adelaide to Outback General Practice Training, Lower Level, 183 Melbourne Street, North Adelaide, SA, 5006, Australia, +61883663100

<sup>6</sup> Discipline of General Practice, School of Medicine, The University of Queensland, L8 Health Sciences Building, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Brisbane, QLD, Australia, +61733655144

<sup>7</sup> University of Newcastle, School of Medicine and Public Health, HMRI Building, John Hunter Hospital Campus, Australia, +61240420514

<sup>8</sup> University of Newcastle, School of Medicine and Public Health, Level 5, McAuley Centre, Calvary Mater, Australia, +61240335710

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## Introduction

Indiscriminate screening and overtesting is increasingly being recognised as a problem within developed countries (1, 2). This has led to increased costs for health care systems, as well as potential harms to patients (2). Vitamin D testing in Australia has increased from 40.6 tests per 100,000 people (costing AUD\$1.02 million) in 2000 to 3472.2 tests per 100,000 people (costing AUD\$96.7 million) in 2010, an increase of 59% per year (3). In North America, specifically Ontario, costs increased from approximately CAD\$1.7 million in 2004 to over CAD\$21 million in 2008 (4). The degree to which this level of testing is evidence-based is currently unknown. But the consequent and potential harms, including over-diagnosis, overtreatment and increased costs are recognised (1, 5).

The only established causal relationships of health outcomes and low Vitamin D, (which have now been disputed (6, 7)), are between vitamin D and bone health and falls (8). Even here, the use of vitamin D supplements for improving bone density and muscle function has not been studied across all age groups (8). There has, however, been much non-evidence-based promotion in both the lay and medical press of the importance of vitamin D deficiency in the causation of multiple disease states (9, 10). This relates to the association (without established causality) with musculoskeletal diseases, infectious diseases, autoimmune diseases, type 1 and 2 diabetes, some types of cancers and, especially, cardiovascular disease (11, 12).

Australian guidelines recommend vitamin D testing only be performed in high risk groups (8). The guidelines recommend targeted testing for those who are at risk of osteoporosis and those who are at high risk of vitamin D deficiency, such as older or disabled people who are housebound, people with dark skin and people who do not

get adequate skin sun exposure. Population screening is not recommended. In particular, screening for chronic disease prevention and in women who are pregnant is not proven to be beneficial (8, 13). Similar guidelines can be found in US and other developed countries, despite differences in population vitamin D status and its determinants, between countries (14, 15).

Levels of vitamin D testing have been determined at a population level in Australia (5). Rates of GPs' testing have previously been reported in Australia (16, 17), but not elsewhere. The clinical associations of testing have not been examined.

Trainees in Australian general practice (GP trainees) function as independent practitioners (with recourse to advice and support from their clinical trainers). They are at a formative stage in their practice (18, 19), and might be thought to be singularly influenced by recent non-evidence-based media reporting of the importance of vitamin D testing.

The aim of this study was to determine the current level of vitamin D testing amongst GP trainees and examine factors associated with this testing in terms of patient, trainee, practice and consultation factors.

## **Methods**

### Selection and Description of Participants

This is a cross-sectional analysis of GP trainee consultations from the Registrars Clinical Encounters in Training (ReCEnT) cohort study, collected over a period from 2010 to 2013. The study methodology has been described in detail elsewhere(20).

Briefly, ReCEnT is undertaken in four geographically-based educational organisations - general practice regional training providers (RTPs) - encompassing urban, rural and remote practices in four Australian states. Data collection for the ReCEnT project takes place within mainstream general practices. Informed consent is obtained for trainees' de-identified data to be used as part of the ReCEnT study.

Trainee and practice characteristics are recorded via self-administered questionnaire to the trainees. Participating trainees record the details of 60 consecutive patient encounters, representing approximately one week of consultations, each six-month training term (up to 4 terms). Consultation data included patient demographics; duration of consultation; problems managed; investigations ordered; prescriptions written; follow-up arranged; and referrals made. Pathology, imaging and problems managed are coded according to the International Classification of Primary Care, second edition classification system (ICPC-2 PLUS) (21).

### Outcome Factors

The primary outcome of this analysis was whether a vitamin D test was ordered within the consultation. This was classified using the ICPC-2 PLUS coding system.

### Independent variables

Independent variables were categorised as patient, trainee, practice or consultation factors.

Patient factors were age, gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, non-English speaking background, new patient to the trainee, and new patient to the practice.

Trainee factors were age, gender, full-time/part-time status (part-time classified as less than 8 sessions per week), training term, and place of qualification (Australia or international).

Practice factors were rurality (classified by Standard Geographical Classification-Remoteness Area (ASGC-RA) classification) (22), decile of Socioeconomic Index for Area (SEIFA) Relative Index of Disadvantage index (23), number of GP's working in the practice, and if the practice entirely bulk-bills (that is, there is no financial cost to the patient for the consultation). Practice postcode was used to define ASGC-RA classification and the SEIFA code of the practice location.

Consultation factors included duration of consultation (in minutes) and number of problems dealt with. Other consultation factors (related to the problem for which the vitamin D test was ordered) that we included in the analysis to explore whether testing was related to the complexity of the consultation included:

- whether the trainee sought in-consultation advice or information (from GP trainer, specialist, hard-copy or electronic sources of information) for this problem
- number of pathology tests ordered for this problem
- whether any imaging was ordered for this problem

Co-ordering of lipid profile tests along with vitamin D for the same problem was also an independent variable. Lipids profile tests were classified using the ICPC-2 PLUS coding system. Rationale for the use of co-ordering as an indicator of 'non-targeted' rather than 'targeted' testing, is that it is very unlikely that both tests would rationally

be ordered for the same clinical problem. If both tests were done as part of a general screen, again, Vitamin D is not recommended to be used as a screening test (13).

### Statistical analysis

Analysis was performed on seven rounds of data collection from 2010 to 2013.

For the outcome, ordering of a Vitamin D test, initial analysis was performed using chi-square and Wilcoxon rank-sum for categorical and continuous data, respectively. Results of these univariate analyses were used to determine which variables would be included in logistic regression models. Logistic regression was used within a generalised estimating equation (GEE) framework, to account for clustering of similar patients for individual trainees. Variables with a p-value less than 0.2 on univariate analysis were included in the multiple logistic regression model.

Descriptive analysis was performed regarding the problem or diagnosis for which the vitamin D tests were ordered and for which vitamin D tests were co-ordered with a lipid profile test.

All statistical analysis was carried out using STATA v11.2

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia. H-2009-0323.

## **Results**

Data was collected during seven project rounds of ReCEnT, from 2010 to 2013, including 593 trainees (response rate 95.3%), 1,169 trainee-rounds and 69,412 trainee-patient encounters.

Characteristics of the patients, trainees and practices in this study are presented in Table 1. Of the 69,412 encounters, 26,166 (38.6% [95%CI: 38.2, 39.0]) were with male patients, with a mean age of 40.2 years for all patients. Of all encounters, 670 (1.0% [95% CI: 1.0, 1.0]) were with patients who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and 3,765 (5.4% [95% CI: 5.3, 5.6]) were from a non-English speaking background. 39,015 (56.2% [95% CI: 55.8, 56.6]) patients were new to the trainee and 4,836 (7.0% [95% CI: 6.8-7.2]) were new to the surgery.

Trainees had a mean age of 32.9 years with 444 (74.9% [95% CI: 71.4, 78.4]) having qualified as a doctor in Australia. Female trainees' constituted 391 (65.9% [95% CI: 62.1, 68.0]) of all trainees.

#### Vitamin D test ordering:

Vitamin D tests were ordered in 1.0% of consultations [95% CI: 1.0-1.1] (726 of 69,412).

Vitamin D tests were ordered most often for the following diagnoses/problems; check-up or health maintenance (31.9%), tiredness or fatigue or lethargy (9.1%) and vitamin D deficiency (7.7%). The top 10 problems are listed in Table 2.

The results of the regression model with vitamin D test ordering as the outcome factor are presented in Table 3. Vitamin D test ordering was significantly associated in an adjusted model with the patient being older, female and from a non-English speaking background. Trainees were less likely to order vitamin D tests if they are in a practice from an inner regional area when compared with a major city. They were more likely to test if they are working in a practice that entirely bulk bills their patients. They were more likely to order a vitamin D test if they deal with more

problems in that consultation, if they ordered more pathology tests and if they also ordered a lipid profile test for the same problem. They were less likely to order vitamin D if they seek in-consultation advice or information and if they order imaging.

#### Vitamin D testing being co-ordered with lipids:

Vitamin D tests were co-ordered with lipids in 34.0% [95% CI: 30.6-37.5](247 of 726) of all of vitamin D tests ordered.

Vitamin D tests were co-ordered with a lipid most often for the following problems or diagnoses; Check-up or health maintenance (46.7%), blood test (4.9%) and tiredness or fatigue or lethargy (4.9%). The top 10 diagnoses/problems are listed in Table 4.

## **Discussion**

### Summary of Principal Findings

We found that GP trainees ordered vitamin D tests in 1.0% of consultations. A trainee ordering a vitamin D test for a patient was significantly associated with older patient age, female gender, and non-English-speaking patient background. Consultations in which vitamin D tests were ordered differed from other consultations, with trainees dealing with more problems, and ordering more pathology tests for the same problem. Trainees commonly co-ordered vitamin D and a lipid profile for the same problem. Trainees were less likely to order a vitamin D test if they sought in-consultation assistance or information or if they ordered any imaging tests .

The problems for which vitamin D tests were most commonly ordered were 'general' rather than 'specific' (check-ups, health maintenance and blood tests in 36% of instances and tiredness or lethargy or fatigue in 9.1% - see Table 2).

### Strengths and limitations

Our study has a number of strengths. The trainee participants had very similar demographics (age, gender and international medical graduate status) to the national GP trainee cohort (24). Also, the study was conducted in four regional training providers across four Australian states, making the findings broadly generalisable to Australian general practice training. The external validity of the findings is further enhanced by the response rate of 95.3%. This is a singularly high response rate in studies of GPs (25).

A limitation is that our study, being a practice-based consultation study, specifically excluded nursing home patients and house-bound patients. Including these high-risk groups may have increased the proportion of 'targeted' vitamin D tests. But it should also be noted that many authorities recommend treating all such patients without testing, and that testing may thus be inappropriate in these groups (26, 27).

Another limitation is that, we defined 'co-ordering' to be ordering of vitamin D and lipid profile for the same diagnosis/problem and *not* when ordering vitamin D and lipid profile in the same consultation but for a different diagnosis/problem. We recognise that it is possible that both tests were 'targeted'. For example, a patient being at risk of both vitamin D deficiency and vascular disease on the basis of ethnicity - but this was anticipated to be very infrequent.

### Interpretation of findings and comparison with existing literature

The rate of vitamin D test ordering in trainees is similar to, but slightly higher than, their established GP colleagues. A comparable study in established Australian general practitioners reported a rate of Vitamin D testing in 0.8% of encounters (16) compared to trainees rate of 1.0%. To our knowledge, this is the first study that also looks at factors associated with primary care practitioners' vitamin D test ordering.

Certain factors in our analysis are suggestive of targeted testing. For example, older females are more likely to have, or be at risk of, osteoporosis (28), and non-English speaking patients may be more likely to have darker skin and be less exposed to the sun for cultural reasons (29, 30). Countering this, current Australian guidelines also state that patients with osteoporosis may not need testing, as their treatment should include vitamin D supplementation irrespective of the results of the test (26).

However, we have also found evidence of non-targeted testing. The association of vitamin D testing with a higher number of pathology tests ordered for the same diagnosis/problem could suggest non-targeted testing, where vitamin D is being included among a host of tests as a health screen. Further evidence of non-targeted ordering of vitamin D tests comes from the high rate of co-ordering with lipid profiles and the prominence of 'check-up', and 'health maintenance' as the problem/diagnosis for which vitamin D was ordered.

Further, though less direct, support for the interpretation of non-targeted testing may be found in the negative associations of vitamin D testing with in-consultation recourse to advice and information. This may suggest that these were non-challenging 'routine' problems/diagnoses: if the trainee has not sought help from

their trainer or another source of information this may suggest they do not find the problem challenging. An alternative explanation is that if advice or information was obtained (for example, from guidelines) this may have discouraged testing. The association of vitamin D testing with more pathology testing but less imaging may also be related to the complexity of the problem being addressed – vitamin D testing tending to be for ‘routine’ health checks and ‘health maintenance,’ with co-ordering of other pathology, rather than more ‘active’ problems (noting that imaging is employed in screening far less than are pathology tests).

The prominence of cardiovascular diseases (hypertension, risk-factor cardiovascular disease and hypercholesterolaemia or dyslipidaemia) on the list of problems/diagnoses involving lipids co-ordered with vitamin D, when compared with the list for all problems associated with Vitamin D testing, may suggest that vitamin D is ordered as an ‘after-thought’ when test-ordering to stratify cardiovascular risk status. The wider context of this finding is the scant evidence causally linking vitamin D deficiency with cardiovascular problems. The current evidence is from observational studies, and any RCT results are inconclusive (11, 12, 31), but the associations have been given prominence in the lay and popular medical presses. Recent systematic reviews have suggested that low vitamin D levels could be a marker of ill-health rather than the cause of ill-health, so testing and supplementation would have no effect on the disease itself (32). Fatigue and tiredness problems also feature as prominent reasons for vitamin D testing - indications which, similarly, are unsupported by Australian guidelines (13, 33, 34)

An overall interpretation of our results is that non-targeted vitamin D testing (that is, testing inconsistent with current guidelines) is prevalent in GP trainees’ practice.

There has been concern expressed regarding the increasing economic burden of an unnecessary increase in vitamin D testing over the past 10 years. Disturbingly, this may be largely related to media prominence and unproven links (3, 35).

#### Implications for practice and policy

Current vitamin D testing in general practice appears at present to be highly prevalent and poorly targeted. Even in some at-risk groups it may not be necessary, irrespective of vitamin D levels, if supplementation can be put in place.(3, 13, 27)

With GPs being responsible for initiating 70% of Medicare-funded pathology tests(36), they have a clear role to play in reducing the cost and harms of overtesting.

Interventions could be aimed at promoting the use of evidence-based guidelines for appropriate vitamin D testing among GP trainees. They are at a stage of career development where evidence-based practice patterns can be established.

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