Still very few smokers are prescribed smoking cessation medications

Smoking cessation rates almost double after prescription of nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) or bupropion in smokers who are motivated to quit. Since ~80% of smokers consult their general practitioner (GP) each year, and 25% of those consulting their GP intend to quit within 1 month (even 37% when they consider having a smoking-related problem), sound medical practice should include drug prescription at least at the same level! This study, based on objective data, gives information concerning the actual prescription rate by GPs in a country where both NRT and bupropion are available on National Health Service (NHS) prescription.

Methods
This cohort study was conducted in 40 general practices in South Yorkshire and the East Midlands (UK), using clinical computing software with coded data, where the deprivation score had been registered in >85% of the patients. All patients aged ≥18 years registered between April 1, 2001 and March 31, 2003 were included. Their smoking status had been encoded a maximum of 5 years before inclusion.

Results
After exclusions, the source population comprised 156,550 patients from 39 practices. Smoking status was recorded in 115,449 (73.7%). Of these, 29,492 (25.5%) were current smokers.

Those who registered were more likely to be female and older, and smoking-related morbidity was more often present. Current smokers were significantly more likely to be younger, male and to come from the most deprived areas.

Overall, 1,892 (6.4%) of the people categorised as current smokers were given smoking cessation medication during the 2-year period. NRT alone was prescribed to 72.8%, bupropion alone to 21.5% and both treatments to 5.7%.

Those who received at least one prescription were more likely to live in the most deprived area (adjusted odds ratio (aOR) 1.50; 95% confidence interval (CI) 1.26–1.76), less likely to be males (aOR 0.68; 95% CI 0.62–0.75) and more likely to be in the age band of 25–74 years rather than 18–24 years.

Smokers with smoking-related morbidity were more likely to receive smoking cessation treatment. The aOR for prescription of bupropion was 1.7 in males (versus 1.0 in females).

Message
In UK general practices, only 6.4% of smokers were given pharmaceutical prescriptions for smoking cessation over a 2-year period.

Editorial comment
This study relies on routinely collected GP data issued from computed files, thus making it more objective than questionnaire surveys, such as the Belta, conducted in Belgium in 1998, where the alleged median rate of prescription of NRT by GPs was 50% [1]. In the Netherlands [2], it has been claimed that NRT was prescribed by 18.3% and bupropion by 65% of GPs in 2003. The present study reveals a very low rate of prescription related to the number of consulting smokers during a 2-year period in general practice, in a country where NRT is available on the NHS: a missed opportunity for one of the most cost-effective healthcare interventions. Specialists should, thus, not completely rely on GPs for the pharmacological treatment of cessation in their smoking patients, and should realise their own role in this context. Further interventions are needed to improve the involvement of health professionals in smoking cessation.

References