

INCREASING DEPENDENCY OF DOCTORS ON INVESTIGATIONS

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No one can deny the importance of different types of blood and radiological investigations for the diagnosis of a disease. The use of different tests in a cost effective way is very important. Good clinical history and examination may reduce the total cost of management of the patients. Of course there are many valid reasons why a doctor cannot perform quality examination to facilitate the diagnosis and decrease the burden of investigations. Important reasons being rush in the outpatient departments or clinics, poor discipline/ sluggish work flow in the hospitals, Covid-19 in the last 2 years and poor literacy of the patients and their attendants which are important obstacles in taking a good history and going through the proper previous medical records of the patients.

In spite of all, it is unfortunate that the trend for advising irrelevant and comparatively less helpful investigations is increasing year by year while the health system is not improving proportionally. This is not only a problem of Pakistan but rather a global issue. Some literature for example shows that a nation wise expenditure on diagnostic tests is growing by 7% yearly without any improvement in the health system¹.

A survey was conducted through a questionnaire from radiologists in Lahore Pakistan regarding the advice of radiological investigations by the doctors. In this survey 74.28% of the radiologists agreed that there is an actual increase in the number radiological tests, 23.8% disagreed and 2% were not sure².

The main reasons for over advising of the radiological tests were the doctors wanted to be clearer on the diagnosis, inadequate knowledge, attitude and training of the doctors to refer the patients to radiological resources.

Some other literature gave the same results showing the following main reasons for increased referral of patients for radiological investigations³.

- a. New radiological technology
- b. Peoples' demands,
- c. Clinicians' intolerance for uncertainty which means the clinicians do not want to be uncertain about the diagnosis of the patient at any cost.
- d. Expanded clinical indications
- e. Availability of the tests

There are many reasons the doctors especially the general physicians are over investigating the patients with different tests. In most of the setups in Pakistan, the tests which are performed on routine bases with or without any rationale are called the basic laboratory investigations (BLIs).

Apart from mal practices, lack of a good clinical history & examination and giving inadequate time to the patients are important reasons for over investigations. Some of the important reasons which have been mentioned in the other literature as well are discussed here.

One of the foremost reasons is the diminution in the quality of clinical skills or clinical judgment. On one side there is an increase in the number of medical colleges but on the other side there is a decrease in the quality of medical education⁴. So it is very important to improve the quality of medical knowledge, history and clinical examination which may help in decreasing the overall cost of medical management.

Another important reason is the patient's demands for the investigations. Due to easy accessibility to the different types of literature about the diseases on the internet, the patients or their close relative may get an ample knowledge about their illnesses then compel the clinicians for advising inappropriate investigations⁵.

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Here to mention the third important reason which is the rise in empowerment of patients and increase in the number of litigations against the clinicians. The clinicians in order to safeguard themselves, in turn compel them to over investigate rather simple ailments.

The easy and free availability of investigations like in a government hospital or through health insurance by the patients also increased the trend for over investigation by the clinicians⁶.

There may be a financial interest of the clinicians in advising the investigations which is also a reason⁷. Doctors might have invested in the laboratories or radiological setups or may be getting incentives from these setups. This is one of the drawbacks of commercialization instead of professionalization in the medical practice.

This increasing trend of dependency on investigations instead of using good medical knowledge and skills is leading to increasing cost of disease management on the part of the patient as well as the overall health care resource of the country. Apart from cost, it increases the workloads of radiological and laboratory setups thereby increasing the delay in diagnose and errors in the investigations.

Some countries have started many educational programs like weekly seminars, lectures, senior clinical staff reviews, computer based systems (to detect inappropriate test usage) or educational material circulated in the form of summaries of some actual patient cases to bring to the young physician's attention to correct improper usage of the investigation facility. In many cases, such programs motivated the young physicians towards good clinical history and examination rather to depend inappropriately on investigations. Since the change noticed was temporary, therefore the recommendation of such programs to be continued was made⁸

At the last I will say that before advising a test, a clinician must ask himself or must know how the test will aid in the diagnosis or in the management of the patient? If he or she knows the answer to this question, then the test should be advised. Otherwise advising a

bunch of tests would be just like throwing a mesh in to the river and see whatever comes out.

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