

Outpatient referrals to a tertiary paediatric cardiology service: evidence of increasing workload.

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In the present era, demands on the specialist services provided in paediatric cardiology centres have increased dramatically. This study aimed to determine the volume and range of outpatient referrals to the paediatric cardiology service in a tertiary teaching hospital.

Information regarding new outpatient patient referral activity in the Department of Paediatric Cardiology, RBHSC was obtained over 2 separate time periods for comparison: January to April (inclusive) 2007 and January to April (inclusive) 2012. The total number of referrals for period January to April (inclusive) 2002 was also obtained.

In 2012 there were 423 new referrals made. This represents a four-fold increase from 2007. The most common reason for referral across both time periods was assessment of a murmur. The average age of referral was just over 4 years (4.7 years in 2007 and 4.3 years in 2012). There was a significant increase in the number of infants (under 1 year old) referred for assessment ($p < 0.05$). Overall the proportion of patients referred with no cardiac pathology has increased. Of the referrals made by GPs in 2012 90.2% had normal hearts compared to 80.3% in 2007. Of referrals made by paediatricians in 2012 82.7% had normal hearts compared to just 28.6% in 2007 ($p < 0.05$). In 2012 64.3% of patients were discharged following the initial outpatient assessment.

New referrals to paediatric cardiology centres continue to increase at an alarming rate. The majority of patients referred have structurally normal hearts and over half can be discharged following the first out patient attendance. There appears to be an increasing reluctance to exclude cardiac pathology among GPs and more worryingly paediatricians in Northern Ireland over recent years. This may have implications for future training and planning of tertiary centre resources.