Introduction

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, over a quarter of Americans currently have a musculoskeletal condition (1). These conditions are a result of the aging and leading cause of primary care visits, with the American population over 65 costing the United States over $850 billion a year. Some contributing factors to the rising cost are the increasing age and weight of the U.S. population (2,3). It is important that primary care physicians understand the common musculoskeletal conditions and how these factors contribute to them. Our research aims to determine which musculoskeletal problems are most prevalent in our patient population, and the influence of age and obesity on the musculoskeletal system.

Methods

Subjects: Medical students documented 726 outpatient visits from 3 family medicine residency programs across Texas. Eligible patients included all patient-visitors seeing a physician in the study clinics during the study period.

Measurement: A Visit Survey documented elements of each primary care visit, including patient demographics, vital signs, reasons for visit, diagnoses, health education, medications prescribed, diagnostic tests ordered, nonmedical treatments, referrals to specialists and admissions to hospitals.

Procedure: Over a one-month period, students documented the most data collection, then randomly selected a physician to shadow. During the physician’s clinic session, the student invited all the physician’s patients to participate in the study. After informed consent, the students observed the visit and completed the Visit Survey.

Results

Of the 726 outpatient visits recorded, 66.1% were female. The ethnicity of the patient population was 58.3% Hispanic, 25.1% Caucasian, 13% African American, and 3.7% Asian. The average age of the patients was 44.3 with 44.9% of the patients falling in the category of age 40-44. Exactly 1/3 of patients seen in the residency programs complained of a musculoskeletal condition. Figure 1 shows the percentage of patients within our patient population complaining of six different musculoskeletal problems.

Musculoskeletal Complaints within the Patient Sample

Figure 1 – Arthritis was the leading musculoskeletal complaint, followed by lower back pain.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of each age group that complained of musculoskeletal problems.

Musculoskeletal Complaints by Age

Figure 2 – The groups with the highest prevalence of musculoskeletal complaints were ages 40-44 (p=0.003).

Figure 3 shows the percentage of each age group that complained of pain.

Pain Complaints by Age

Figure 3 – The oldest and youngest categories were least likely to complain of pain.

Acknowledgements

This study was conducted in The Residency Research Network of Texas (RRNet) with support from the Office of the Medical Dean at UTHSCSA and the Health Resources and Services Administration (Award # D45HP16444).

Conclusions

Arthritis and pain were the leading musculoskeletal complaints found in our patient sample. The prevalence of arthritis increased directly with age; interestingly, musculoskeletal complaints and complaints of general pain did not increase directly with age. Figure 3 shows that after age 75 there is a significant decrease in complaints of pain, which may account for the decrease of musculoskeletal complaints seen within the same age group. Some studies found female patients report peaks at age 65 because elderly adults have reduced sensitivity to painful stimuli. (4,5) This reduced sensitivity could explain why the oldest age group (75+) reports less musculoskeletal problems. Another possibility is that people who do not report pain are more likely to live past age 75.

Although BMI was not directly correlated with the number of overall musculoskeletal complaints, there were correlations with more specific problems. In particular, knee problems do not correlate with BMI; in fact, obese patients were more likely to report knee problems. In contrast, muscle aches are not generally caused by increased BMI, although knee joints. One study suggests that obese women are 4 times more likely to have knee problems, while obese men are 5 times more likely to have knee problems (6). Increasing BMI was also correlated with increasing complaints of muscle aches, as muscle aches can be due to overworking of muscles to move increased weight or the higher chance of developing type 2 diabetes. Diabetes can lead to neuropathy and muscle weakness, which could be the reason why increased BMI is correlated with increased incidence of muscle aches.

Musculoskeletal problems have been correlated with increased age and increased weight, while costing the American population $850 billion a year. The American population is becoming increasingly older and more obese, which will lead to an even greater amount of musculoskeletal problems. Because of these factors, it is important that primary care physicians understand the leading musculoskeletal problems and how to treat them effectively.

References

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