

Islet Cell Transplantation: improving regional accessibility

Islet cell transplantation is an established but specialist treatment for patients with Type 1 diabetes and severe hypoglycaemia that involves extracting islet cells from the pancreas of a deceased donor and implanting them in the liver of recipients. Following the procedure blood glucose control is improved and patients usually regain the classic warning signs of low blood sugar which reduces the risk of severe hypoglycaemic episodes and improves patients' quality of life.

The current service in the Thames Valley region requires patients to attend the Oxford Centre for Diabetes, Endocrinology and Metabolism, which for many people means travelling long distances for short but essential appointments. This can be particularly difficult for patients whose hypoglycaemia has resulted in the loss of a driving licence and who are reliant on public transport or family members and for those in full time work.

To improve access to the service, the AHSN is helping to establish a hub-and-spoke clinic network in the Thames Valley to enable initial assessment and some follow-ups to be carried out in virtual clinics at peripheral sites, although the procedure will continue to take place in Oxford. The advantages of this approach include:

- reduction in patients' travel time
- greater flexibility for working people
- less stressful appointments for patients
- faster clinical decisions facilitated by email referrals and dialogue.

Referral protocols and hub-and-spoke clinic arrangements have been agreed with sites in the region, and data is being compiled on the potential travel distance saved by running virtual clinics at peripheral sites. A patient questionnaire will be used to assess experience of the service and a survey of GPs in the region is planned to determine the number of people with Type 1 diabetes under the care of GPs, in order to further highlight the service.

At the time of writing, there have been 8 referrals since the project began in February 2015. This compares with 9 referrals over the previous 5 years – a strong indication of the initial success of the project and need for the service.

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