

GEMs offer brief updates from general practice research tackling the challenges of front-line practice.

The title of your research

Use of gut-feelings when assessing cancer risk

Your name

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The clinical problem tackled by this research.

Gut-feelings play a crucial role in clinical decision making in primary care and can compliment rather than conflict with evidence-based practice.

What this research tells us about this problem.

That GPs use their clinical intuition or gut-feelings when assessing the risk of serious illness such as cancer has been previously reported but GPs also report that they can have difficulty acting on their gut-feelings and it has even been suggested that gut-feelings are incompatible with evidence-based practice. The factors that contribute to reliable gut-feelings, how they are used, and how they can be fostered in trainee and newly qualified GPs are also not well understood. This research sought to answer these questions by interviewing GPs who had made a referral to an urgent suspected cancer pathway based on a gut-feeling.

How does the research help with the problem?

- GPs were wary of openly using their gut-feelings because they might appear 'unscientific', however when GPs experience a gut-feeling about a patient they described engaging in deeper clinical reasoning, investigation, and evidence gathering to try to build a case for the patient's referral to specialist services.
- GPs believed that reliable gut-feelings came with greater clinical experience, empathy with patients, and attention to detail.
- GPs described a grey area in patient presentations where the GP's assessment of the patient's need for further investigation and clinical guidance does not agree.
- GPs were more cautious about using gut-feelings to delay or deny further investigation than to prompt referral

The research team (* are GPs)

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Suggested WISE action

- Mentorship programs should be set up pairing more and less experienced GPs to allow less experienced GPs to discuss and develop their gut-feelings.
- Encourage the discussion of gut-feelings at practice meetings.
- GPs should be encouraged to record when gut-feelings play a role in their clinical decision-making.
- GPs should remain wary of making decisions not to investigate a patient further based solely or substantially on a gut-feeling.

Where you can read more about this work.

Published article: GPs' use of gut feelings when assessing cancer risk: a qualitative study in UK primary care. British Journal of General Practice 2021; 71 (706): e356-e363. DOI: 10.3399/bjgp21X714269. <https://bjgp.org/content/71/706/e356>

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