

# **A toll-free helpline dedicated to multiple sclerosis: patients' satisfaction and impact on healthcare providers**

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Objective.

To assess the impact of a toll-free helpline for outpatients with multiple sclerosis (MS) in providing an easier and more timely communication with the MS Centre and in reducing burn-out of healthcare providers.

Methods.

A free-of-charge helpline (Project 'Close to Care' Â©) was dedicated to patients with MS attending the MS Centre of S. Andrea Hospital (Monday to Friday, 8 hours per day). A letter informing about the services provided by the helpline was consecutively given to outpatients from June to December 2012. The helpline provided logistical information (requests for reports, certifications, etc.), reservation of magnetic resonance scan and outpatient visit. In case of medical problems, callers were referred to neurologists via e-mail alerts. Patients were then contacted by a neurologist within 12 hours and, when necessary, they were submitted to an urgent visit as soon as possible.

At first and second calls, patients were asked to rank their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1=not very satisfied, 7=very satisfied) with the following sentences: 'it is easy access to magnetic resonance scan'; 'it is easy to contact my neurologist'; 'this helpline is an useful service'. Healthcare providers (7 neurologists, 4 nurses, 3 administrative employers, and 2 psychologists) were also tested by means of the 24-item Link Burn-out Questionnaire (LBQ) before the helpline was activated and after 12 months.

Results.

A total of 222 patients received the informing letter, and 187 (84.2%) called the helpline from June 2012 to May 2013. Among them, 61 patients called once, 36 twice, and 40 thrice or more. Overall, 310 calls were received for the following reasons: contact with neurologists (34.8%), reservation of outpatients visit (23.3%), certification (18.8%), reservation of magnetic resonance scan (13.6%), emergencies (6.4%), not congruent requests (3.1%).

The median [interquartile range] level of agreement with the sentences 'it is easy to contact my neurologist', and 'this helpline is an useful service' increased from 7 [2.5] to 7 [1] ( $p=0.02$ ), and from 7 [2] to 7 [1] ( $p=0.03$ ), respectively. The median level of agreement with the sentence 'it is easy access to magnetic resonance scan' did not significantly change ( $p=0.27$ ).

There was no significant changes over time in LBQ score or its subscales (psycho-physical exhaustion, relationship deterioration, sense of professional failure and disillusion) among healthcare providers (all  $p$ -values  $\geq 0.15$ ).

Conclusion.

Patients found the helpline useful and most of them used the service at least twice. The helpline increased the patients' satisfaction in terms of accessibility to contact with their neurologists. However, it had no influence on burn-out of healthcare providers in the short-term period.

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**Topic:** Sclerosi multipla 1

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