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17th March 09

Osteoporosis awareness on Mother's Day

A new partnership between the Royal United Hospital Bath and the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases is helping women at risk of osteoporosis to get help earlier.

Thanks to a new £16,000 investment from NHS Bath and NE Somerset, specialists from the two hospitals are working together to provide a falls and fracture liaison service for patients who attended clinics following a fracture, or the A&E department with a fall. The new service will scan patients for early signs of osteoporosis and identify patients who have problems with balance or walking and might be at risk of falling.

Almost one in two women and one in five men over the age of 50 in the UK will fracture a bone, mainly as a result of osteoporosis (source: National Osteoporosis Society). A condition that causes the weakening of bones, osteoporosis occurs more commonly in post-menopausal women when the body becomes less able to replace worn-out bone.

Julie Stone, Orthopaedic Manager at the RUH said "Many people don't know they have osteoporosis as it often causes no symptoms at first. Patients are usually unaware that they have fragile bones until the time of a first fracture. Normal x-rays will only show the disease when around one third of the bone mass has already gone.

"A dual energy X-ray scan (DEXA) is a simple non invasive scan which measures bone density and can be used to detect reduced bone density (osteoporosis) in its early stages. Once diagnosed, treatment for osteoporosis can begin which helps prevent further fractures by strengthening the bones". The results of the scans are sent directly to GPs who can then prescribe relevant drugs to treat the osteoporosis and help prevent patients from fracturing in the future. But if necessary, patients may also be referred on to the

RNHRD via a direct access referral for more detailed measurements of hip and spine bone density.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) highlight the link between osteoporosis and increased risk of falls. RUH patients with falls or fractures are assessed using a set of simple questions. By recording whether the patient has fallen before or if they are unsteady on their feet, the team can assess their risk of falling again and can arrange for a falls assessment to be carried out.

The referrals are made to clinics, such as the Falls and Balance Clinic at St Martin's Hospital, to ensure that patients at risk will be identified and have access to appropriate care that can help reduce the likelihood of them falling again.

Dr Nigel Harris, Head of Clinical Measurement at the RNHRD said "The partnership has had excellent outcomes for patients. Working together we have managed to triple the number of scans performed and introduced the falls assessment. In January of this year 134 patients received a scan compared with 50 in January last year; meaning over 1000 more people could be scanned in 2009 than in the previous year.

"This is a great example of different parts of the NHS working together to provide a joined up service for the benefit of patients."

Julie adds "The team have learnt together, started a new service together and cooperated fully with each other to provide the best outcome for patients."

Bath and North East Somerset has one of the highest rates of hip fractures from falls in the UK, mainly due to the older population of the area.

The DEXA scanning is part of a larger project, a new Falls and Fracture Liaison Service which links together primary and secondary care providers to make sure high risk patients receive the treatment and support they need, from their very first fall or fracture.

The Bath and NE Somerset Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) (2008) identified that falls and the injuries which result are a particular problem amongst older people with a higher than average hospital stay due to hip fracture.

ENDS

Interview opportunities are available with Sue Gage, Trauma Nurse Specialist, on Tuesday 17th and Thursday 19th March. Please call Rachel on 01225 826230 to arrange.

Notes for Editors

The Falls and Fracture Liaison Service is a partnership between the RNHRD, RUH and BANES PCT. These organisations are working together to help people who experience a number of falls, reduce the number of people admitted to hospital as a result of a fall, and reduce the number of people who fall being taken by ambulance to A&E.

DEXA stands for dual energy X-ray absorptiometry. A DEXA scan is fast and accurate and is preferred over a normal X-ray for detecting bone density because it is more sensitive. DEXA scans can also measure the calcium content in bones, which cannot be measured in an ordinary X-ray.

http://www.rnhrd.nhs.uk/departments/clinical_measurement/bone_densitometry.htm

A DEXA scan is used to assess bone mineral density and work out whether the readings are significantly lower than normal for a patient's age and sex.

Women have smaller bones than men and they also experience the menopause which accelerates the process of bone turnover. The female hormone oestrogen has a protective effect on bones. At the menopause (around the age of 50) the ovaries almost stop producing this hormone reducing the protection it gives to bones.