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Early treatments benefit osteoporosis patients

On World Osteoporosis Day, Tuesday 20 October, the Royal United Hospital Bath (RUH) and the Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases (RNHRD) will host events to highlight risks associated with osteoporosis and the benefits of early treatment.

Chair of the Bath branch of National Osteoporosis Society Maxine Zell says: "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 – a condition that causes weakening of bones. To mark World Osteoporosis Day, people are invited to visit our stand in the atrium at the RUH or to come along to our tea party from 2pm to 4pm in the lecture hall at the Min to learn more about osteoporosis and how early treatment can help."

A partnership between the RUH and the RNHRD is helping people at risk of osteoporosis to get help earlier. Thanks to a £16,000 investment from NHS Bath and NE Somerset, and NHS Wiltshire, specialists from the two hospitals are working together to provide a falls and fracture liaison service for patients who attend clinics following a fracture, or the A&E department with a fall. The service scans patients for early signs of osteoporosis and identifies patients who have problems with balance or walking, and who may be at risk from falling.

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."

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.

ENDS

Interview opportunities are available with chair of the Bath branch of the National Osteoporosis Society Maxime Zell on Monday 19 October and Tuesday 20 October. Please call Jane Thompson on 01225 821299 to arrange.

Notes for Editors

The Falls and Fracture Liaison Service is a partnership between the RNHRD, RUH and BANES and Wiltshire PCTs. These organisations are working together to help people who experience a fracture or a number of falls, reduce the number of people admitted to hospital as a result of a fall and to prevent osteoporosis fractures, 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.