

Referral guidelines for medical imaging - availability and use in the European Union

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Background

Imaging referral guidelines are intended to help physicians decide when an imaging study is useful and identify the most appropriate examination for a particular patient.

The European Council Directive 97/43/Euratom requires Member States "to ensure that recommendations concerning referral criteria for medical exposures, including radiation doses, are available to the prescriber of medical exposures."

In recent years, imaging referral guidelines have received much attention from the radiation protection community and international organisations. However despite this attention, there had been no clear picture of the availability and implementation of referral guidelines in Europe until recently. To address this deficiency, the European Commission launched a project in 2011 for the **implementation of Council Directive 97/43/Euratom requirements concerning referral criteria for medical imaging in the European Union**, aimed at collecting information from national authorities and professional societies.

Referral Guidelines for Medical Imaging – an EC Tender Project

The EC-funded Referral Guidelines Tender Project was carried out by a consortium composed of five organisations: the European Society of Radiology (ESR) as coordinator, the Royal College of Radiologists (RCR), the Société Française de Radiologie (SFR), the Cardiovascular and Interventional Radiology Society of Europe (CIRSE) and the European Society of Paediatric Radiology (ESPR). In addition, an advisory board was composed of representatives of relevant professional disciplines, as well as experts from the World Health Organisation, the International Atomic Energy Agency and various national authorities.



Objectives:

The main objectives of this Tender Project were to study the development and implementation of referral guidelines for radiological imaging in the EU Member States, the organisation of a European Workshop and the guidance of national and community action.

Work Packages:

The Referral Guidelines Tender Project was divided into three Work Packages, each of which covered specific tasks: project management, the study on the development and implementation of referral guidelines, the organisation of a European workshop and the conclusion of the workshop regarding the need for national and community action.

The main tasks were to develop a web-based survey in order to assess the availability of imaging referral guidelines and to organise a European Workshop on the development of referral guidelines for radiological imaging in the EU Members States.

A questionnaire devised by the RCR together with other members of the project consortium was distributed to representatives of national radiological and nuclear medicine societies, as well as national radiological protection competent authorities in 30 European countries, including 27 European Union member states, Croatia (accessing state) and countries using European legislation, namely, Norway and Switzerland.

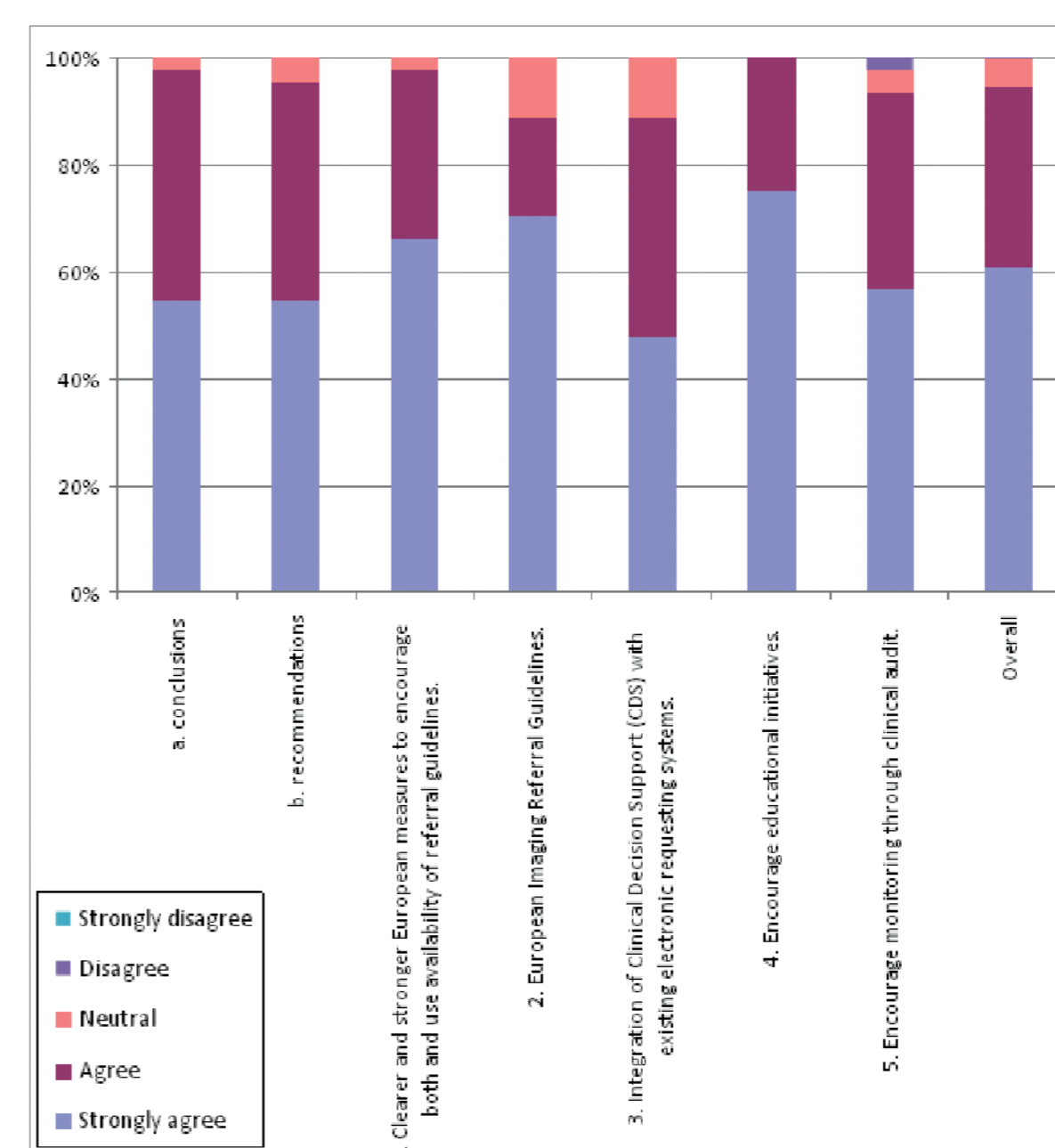
As an integral part of the EC Imaging Referral Guidelines Project, a 1.5-day workshop was held in Vienna on 20-21 September, 2012.

Recommendations and survey conclusions

- » **Development and integration of Clinical Decision Support (CDS).** There is strong support for the concept of integrating Guidelines into clinical decision support systems and, as a future development, provision of guidance through existing electronic requesting systems.
- » **Clearer and stronger European measures to encourage both availability and use of referral guidelines.** Such measures should be created centrally or through European competent authorities.
- » **European Guidelines.** These may be produced initially by a combination of existing national Guidelines, developed using accepted methodology, under the auspices of a European professional organisation. European Guidelines must contain dose information and must include separate advice for children, and the pregnant woman/unborn child.
- » **Encouragement of educational initiatives.** Educational initiatives are highly favoured to improve implementation, followed by involvement of referring clinicians in guidelines development.
- » **External audit and local internal audit.** External audit has been addressed in EC guidelines on clinical audit, but further measures to promote local internal audit are needed.

Workshop conclusions and findings

- » Agreement that reinforcing the use of imaging referral guidelines is essential. Recommendations are to use educational initiatives and to consider clinical decision support systems.
- » Broad agreement that European imaging referral guidelines are essential and should include specific advice for imaging children. The recommendation is for amalgamating the existing, rigorously-developed national referral guidelines rather than duplicating efforts by developing Guidelines de novo.
- » The results of the survey carried out by the project consortium indicate that imaging referral guidelines are available in two thirds of the EU Member States with legal requirements for Guidelines and in only one third of those countries who do not have a legal requirement for Guidelines. As the situation in many European countries is rapidly changing, participants agreed that a re-audit should be performed by the project organisers prior to making recommendations for Community action.
- » Agreement and recommendation for monitoring through clinical audit, preferably external but also local internal audit.



Stakeholder consultation: Agreement to draft conclusions and recommendations by organisations responding to consultation. Individual recommendations are numbered 1 to 5. Conclusions and recommendations, individually and collectively received high level consensus from respondents.

Two articles related to the project, "European survey on imaging referral guidelines" and "Imaging referral guidelines in Europe: now and in the future—EC Referral Guidelines Workshop Proceedings" were published in Insights into Imaging in December 2013.