

## **Study Results: The effect of triage assessments on identifying inflammatory arthritis and reducing rheumatology wait times in Ontario**

**Authors:** Ahluwalia V, Bombardier C, Brooks S, Bell M, Cesta A, Fullerton L, Karasik A, Kendzerska T, Sweezy, Widdifield J.

**Abstract:** Many patients in Ontario experience long wait times to see a rheumatologist after their family doctor refers them. For those with inflammatory arthritis, waiting months to receive treatment may result in unnecessary joint damage. The average wait time from referral to rheumatologist in Ontario is 122 days. Specially trained Extended Role Providers (ERPs) can be used in rheumatology settings to assess patients on waiting lists, identify those with inflammatory arthritis, and ensure they are seen within a timely manner. This research explored the impact of integrating ERPs into rheumatology clinics. Six rheumatology sites participated in this research, and 177 patients on rheumatology waiting lists received a joint assessment from an ERP to determine their urgency. Of those prioritized by the ERP, the average wait time from doctor's referral to rheumatologist's first visit was 37 days. Rheumatologists suspected inflammatory arthritis or connective tissue disease in 58 of the 71 who were prioritized. Of those who were not prioritized, the average wait time for doctor's referral to first rheumatology appointment was 100 days, however these patients also benefited as they received education on exercise and joint protection. This research demonstrates that ERP joint assessments in rheumatology clinics can significantly reduce wait times to rheumatology care for those with inflammatory disease. This model of care has the potential to improve access to rheumatology care and reduce joint damage for those with inflammatory arthritis.