Incidental Findings Review: Plain English Summary

Background

Early detection of diseases can often allow for better and faster treatment. In the UK there are a number of screening programmes that look for the early stages of disease. Examples include mammography screening for breast cancer, and newborn screening for certain genetic diseases.

When people take part in screening programmes, other findings are sometimes discovered, separate to the condition being screened for. The screening test may find another condition which could be important to a person’s health, for example a lung cancer screening program that uses xrays of the chest, may also find problems with the heart or the ribs. These are known as incidental findings. Incidental findings can affect the balance between the benefits and harms of a screening test.

Health economic evaluations are assessments of healthcare information which weigh up the costs and benefits of different options. Economic evaluations are used to make decisions on whether to introduce new screening programmes. However, there is little guidance on how incidental findings should be included in economic evaluations.

Researching incidental findings is complicated because researchers have not agreed on the meaning of incidental findings, and some researchers prefer to use alternative terms, such as ‘secondary findings’ or ‘unanticipated findings.’

This project will identify and review scientific papers and reports to understand how incidental findings are defined, which terms are used to refer to incidental findings, and how incidental findings have been included in economic evaluations of screening programmes

Aims

The aims of this project are:

* + - To establish the similarities and differences between the meanings of incidental findings in research
    - To determine which words and phrases are used in research to refer to incidental findings
    - To assess how incidental findings have been included in economic evaluations of screening programmes

Methods:

We will:

-Search for and identify economic evaluations of screening programmes which incorporate incidental findings, as well as other studies which have considered incidental findings

-Compare what different studies mean by incidental findings

-Compare the words and phrases used in different studies to refer to incidental findings

-Compare how incidental findings have been included in different economic evaluations of screening programmes.