NICE National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

RAPID C-19: Achievements and Challenges of a Collaborative Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the UK

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Background

This review explores the achievements and challenges of the research to access pathway for investigational drugs for COVID-19 (RAPID C-19). This UK multi-agency initiative includes NICE, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), NHS England and Improvement (NHSE&I) and the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Created to respond to the pandemic, RAPID C-19 works to get effective COVID-19 treatments to patients quickly and safely[1]. The scope of its work includes therapeutics for treating and preventing COVID-19, but excludes vaccines.

How it works

NIHR Innovation Observatory scans and prioritises worldwide clinical trials on COVID-19 treatments and sends results to NICE

NICE identifies promising treatments and writes briefings on them, with support from the Scottish Medicines Consortium. Briefings summarise the existing evidence, key ongoing clinical trials and other information

The oversight group (senior members of the RAPID C-19 agencies) critically reviews the briefings. If the evidence is robust, the group agrees steps needed to make the treatment available to patients quickly, through accelerated regulatory and commissioning processes

Patient access

NHSE&I publishes a UK clinical policy confirming who can have the treatment

Achievements

Bringing effective treatments to patients quickly

8 drugs can be used to treat COVID-19 in the UK (as of March 2022)

Some COVID-19 treatments were available for patients within just 10 to 15 days of trials reporting clinical benefit (compared with around 9 months for policy development in a non-COVID setting in England).

Setting up a system to rapidly respond to changing needs

82 RAPID C-19 meetings held since April 2020

85 briefings discussed

Evidence on more than 80 treatments is still being monitored. Most are anti-inflammatories or immunomodulators, antivirals and neutralising monoclonal antibodies.

Working together

Working in partnership, with a willingness to share information at regular virtual meetings, has been essential to the success of RAPID C-19. It has strengthened working relationships among the partner agencies, devolved administrations and bodies such as the UK government's Antivirals and Therapeutics Task Force.

"It is really valuable to be involved in this fast paced work and to work closely with colleagues across so many national agencies"
Anne Lee, Chief Pharmacist, Scottish Medicines Consortium

Challenges

Deciding which treatments to prioritise has been challenging because of the uncertainty about how the pandemic would develop, including the variants that might emerge, and the effect of vaccination. More is understood about the disease now, although the situation remains highly uncertain.

Another key challenge is having to assess evidence and make recommendations based on limited information. For example, on the interim results of a trial or on information published in a preprint or press release. But this pragmatic approach is necessary because of the urgent need for treatments in a global pandemic[2].

Conclusion

Despite the significant challenges, UK healthcare agencies have successfully worked together in an unprecedented way to bring effective COVID-19 treatments to patients as quickly as possible. RAPID C-19 has adapted to the changing environment and healthcare system needs, and continues to monitor potential treatments.

This model of collaboration could work in non-COVID settings and in other countries to speed access to beneficial treatments for patients.

References
1. NICE Research to access pathway for investigational drugs for COVID-19 (RAPID C-19) online, accessed 7 April 2022
2. Umeweni N, Williams H, Kessel A, Brett A (2021) UK's emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic HSJ online

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