

Rheumatology: introduction

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Musculoskeletal disorders present major clinical and health economic challenges in the UK today. Musculoskeletal symptoms are amongst the most common causes of visits to general practitioners. Many people with chronic symptoms find their lifestyles considerably hampered and these conditions are a major cause of lost work days. There are many different types of rheumatological disorders ranging from very common chronically painful soft tissue conditions, such as fibromyalgia, through osteoarthritis and inflammatory arthritis to the rarer but potentially life-threatening autoimmune conditions such as lupus. History and examination are the key steps in diagnosing most of these conditions, particularly in primary care. There have been considerable advances in imaging techniques used in rheumatology over the last two decades, particularly the accurate identification and quantification of bone and joint inflammation using ultrasound and magnetic resonance imaging. This issue of *Medicine* covers history-taking and examination in rheumatology and also describes the use of imaging and synovial fluid analysis to aid diagnosis.

Three articles describe management of non-inflammatory conditions. Crystal arthritis is painful and can be disabling. If diagnosed accurately and managed effectively, however, patients with crystal arthritis can be rendered practically symptom-free. There are refractory cases of gout, in particular, for which newly developed drugs are useful. Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis and likely to become even more important as the population continues to age. Although there are no drugs in routine use that modify the progress of osteoarthritis, research in this field is ongoing. There is increasing interest and participation in sport and exercise of all kinds, and these activities can lead to a range of different injuries or symptoms. It is important to balance control of the symptoms with enabling the patient to continue exercising in a way that is safe and pain-free.

In summary, this issue addresses the management of several common musculoskeletal disorders in Britain today and will be invaluable to rheumatologists and non-specialists alike.