

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF RHEUMATIC DISEASES IN GREECE IS VERY LOW

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Introduction

In previous epidemiological studies in the general population of Greece we have found that rheumatic diseases constitute a major public health problem because, firstly, they are very common - their prevalence is as high as 26.9% of adults - and, secondly, compared to all other major disease groups, rheumatic diseases are the most common cause of chronic health problems, long-term disability, short-term disability, and physician office visits, while they rank second for the use of prescription or non-prescription drugs^{1,2}. We have also found that early correct diagnosis and effective therapeutic management of rheumatic diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis or seronegative spondylarthritides, are mainly depended on early consultation with rheumatologists^{3,4}. However, the majority of these patients consult rheumatologists long after their disease onset; therefore, both correct diagnosis and treatment are delayed^{3,4}. Although the reasons for this delay in consulting rheumatologists are unknown, a possible cause could be a low level of public awareness of the rheumatic diseases.

Objective

To assess the level of awareness of the rheumatic diseases in the general population using as criteria i) the knowledge of which system or organs are mainly affected by rheumatic diseases, and ii) the estimation of the study participants regarding the level of the public education on these diseases.

Methods

This phone survey was conducted on a randomly selected sample of 3910 adults (≥ 19 yrs old) in urban, suburban and rural areas in northern, central and southern Greece. The study was based on a standardized questionnaire aiming to reveal i) the level of public awareness regarding which system or organs are mainly affected by rheumatic diseases, ii) which medical specialist healthy subjects would consult if they presented non-traumatic joint, back or neck pain, iii) which medical specialist patients had consulted if they already had non-traumatic joint, back or neck pain for >1.5 month duration within the last 12 months, and iv) the level of public education on rheumatic diseases on the basis of responses to the following multiple choice question: Do you consider that the level of public education on rheumatic diseases is: nonexistent, minimal, sufficient or high?

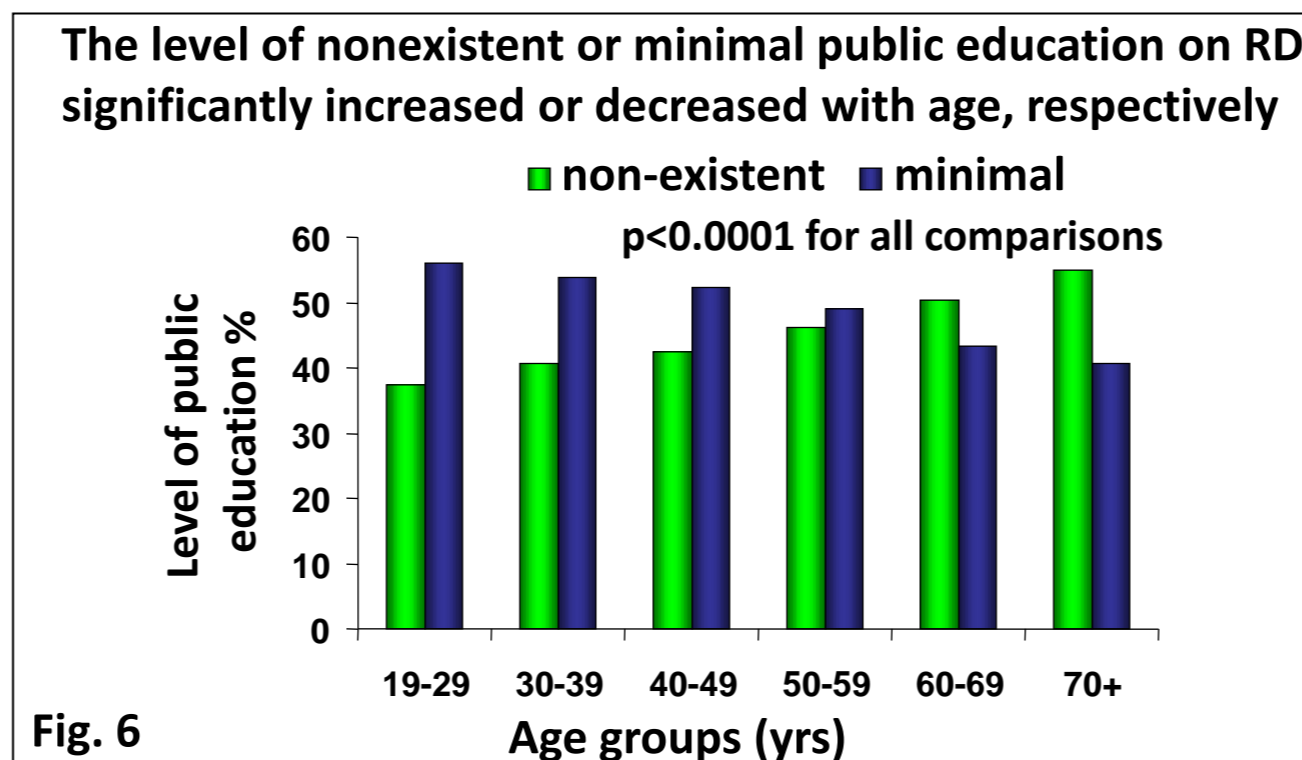
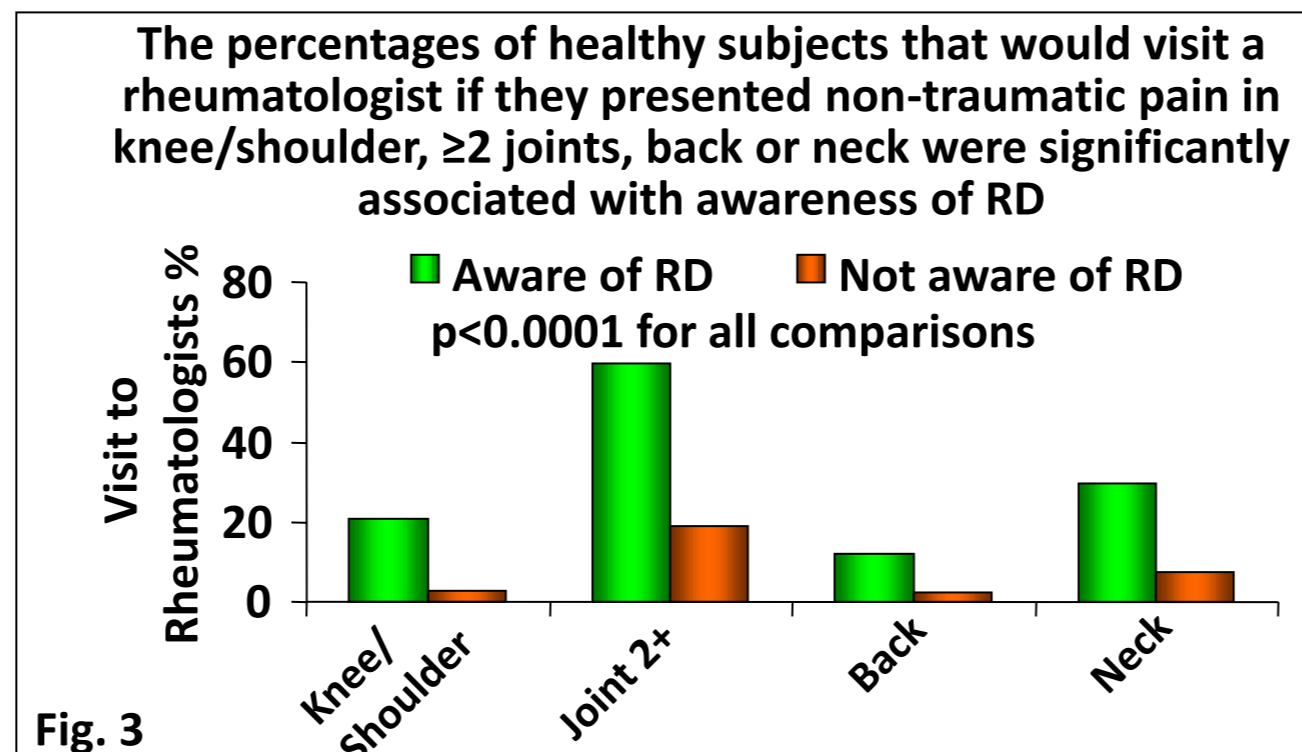
Results

From the 3910 subjects, 3433 (median age 56 yrs, range 19-85 yrs) participated in the study (response rate 87.8%) (Table 1). Of these subjects 2445 were healthy and 988 (28.8%) were patients with non-traumatic pain of >1.5 month duration within the last 12 months involving their joints, neck or back. The level of awareness of the rheumatic diseases was very low, since only 13.3% of the study participants considered that these diseases affect mainly the musculoskeletal system or joints (Fig. 1). The level of awareness was significantly higher among women (14.4%) compared to men (10%) as well as in the 19-55 age group (15%) compared to the group aged ≥ 56 (11.6%) (Fig. 2). The percentages of healthy subjects that would visit a rheumatologist in case of having non-traumatic pain in knee/shoulder, ≥ 2 joints, back or neck were significantly higher among those who knew that rheumatic diseases affect the musculoskeletal system or joints (20.9%, 59.7%, 12%, and 29.8%, respectively) than among those who did not have this knowledge (2.9%, 19%, 2.1%, and 7.3%, respectively) (Fig. 3). Similarly, the percentages of patients who had consulted rheumatologists for non-traumatic pain of >1.5 month duration within the last 12 months in their joints, back or neck were significantly higher among those who knew that rheumatic diseases affect the musculoskeletal system or joints (68.4%, 22.7%, and 48.4%, respectively) than among those who did not have this knowledge (5.8%, 0.4%, and 1.6%, respectively) (Fig. 4). On the other hand, public education on rheumatic diseases was considered as nonexistent by 47.1% of the study participants, minimal by 47.5%, sufficient by 5.1% and high by 0.3% (Fig. 5). The level of nonexistent public education increased significantly with age from 37.3% in the 19-29 age group to 55% in the group aged ≥ 70 . On the contrary, the level of minimal public education decreased significantly with age from 56% in the 19-29 age group to 40.2% in the group aged ≥ 70 (Fig. 6). Finally, the level of nonexistent public education was significantly higher in rural areas (52.9%) as compared to both urban (44.2%) or suburban areas (45.6%) ($p < 0.0001$ and $p < 0.001$, respectively). On the contrary, the level of minimal public education was significantly lower in rural areas (41.6%) than in urban (49.8%) or in suburban areas (50.1%) ($p < 0.0001$ for both comparisons).

Demographics of the study population			
Variable	Total	Males	Females
Population	3433	849 (24.7)	2584 (75.3)
Urban	1429 (41.6)	341 (40.2)	1088 (42.7)
Suburban	992 (28.9)	244 (28.7)	748 (28.9)
Rural	1012 (29.5)	264 (31.1)	748 (28.9)
Age (yrs), mean (SD)	55.1 (16.7)	55.2 (17.8)	55.0 (16.4)
Patients with RD	988 (28.8)	158 (18.6)	830 (32.1)

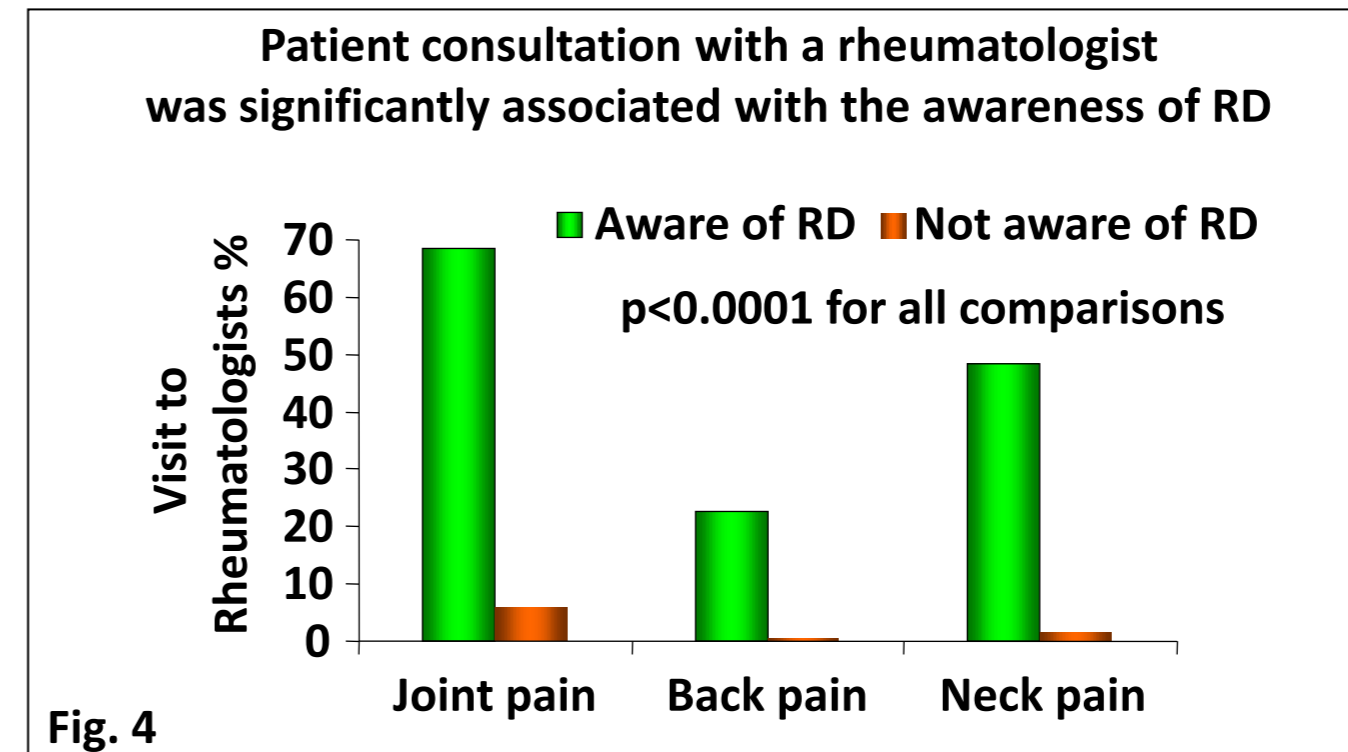
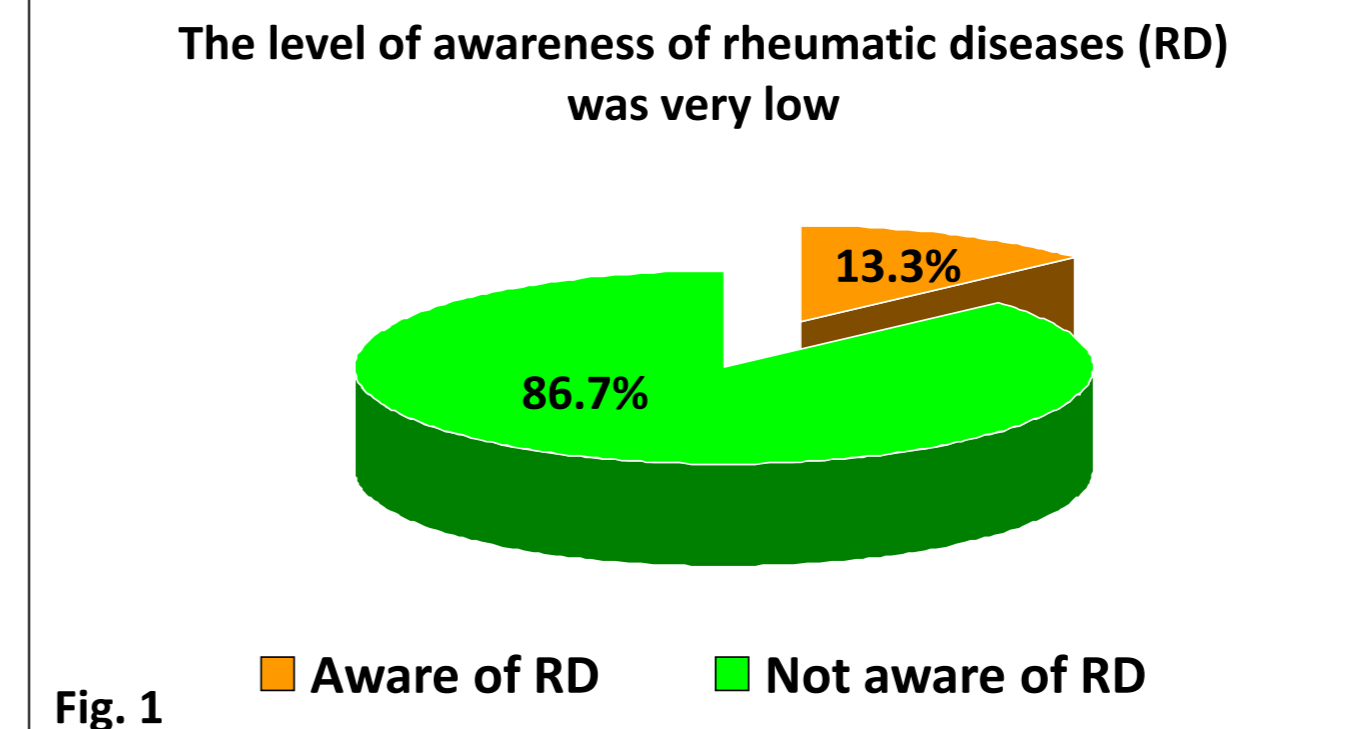
Values in parentheses are percentages unless otherwise stated;
RD=rheumatic diseases

Table 1.



References

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Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the level of public awareness of rheumatic diseases is very low and it leads to the delayed visit of patients with such diseases to rheumatologists. Moreover, public education on rheumatic diseases is minimal to nonexistent. For these reasons and since rheumatic diseases, firstly, constitute a major public health problem and, secondly, their early diagnosis and effective treatment are mainly associated with early consultation with rheumatologists, it is apparent that a program for systematic education of the public on rheumatic diseases at a national level is highly needed.

