# Abstract

**Background :** Atrial fibrillation is a progressive condition affecting up to one person in fifty in the UK. It raises lifetime stroke risk, and is treated by prescribing oral anticoagulants (OACs), which reduces the risk of stroke, but in some cases cause severe haemorrhages which can be fatal.

Objective: To assess the clinical and cost effectiveness of using transthoracic echocardiography (TTE) to help make the decision whether to prescribe OACs.

**Methods:** A discrete event simulation (DES) mathematic model was developed in order to simulate the lifetime patient experience resulting from either an OAC prescription decision using a standard clinical decision tool (CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc) alongside TTE, compared to a standard clinical decision tool along. From this, the incremental costs and utilities were estimated in order to calculate the incremental cost effectiveness ratio. (ICER)

Target Population: Sixty year old males with newly diagnosed atrial fibrillation and without a previous history of coronary heart disease or stroke.

Time Horizon: lifetime.

Perspective: NHS

Interventions: Dabigatran 150mg twice daily if the decision to prescribe an OAC was made. In the base cases one of two clinical decision tools (CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc) was used. In the comparators information from the decision tool was combined with information made available by performing a TTE.

Outcome Measures: Quality adjusted life years (QALYs).

**Results:** Adding TTE to the decision to prescribe OACs appears cost-effective when a less inclusive strategy is used as the baseline strategy, but not when a more inclusive strategy is used.

**Limitations:** Data used to populate many important parameters in the model were either missing or limited.

**Conclusions:** The estimated incremental cost effectiveness of using TTE to make the decision to prescribe depends on the choice of comparator, and appears cost effective at standard National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) thresholds when a less inclusive comparator (CHADS2) is used, but not when a more inclusive comparator (CHA2DS2-VASc)

## Introduction

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is a progressive condition affecting around 1-2% of the UK population, disproportionately older people, and is a significant risk factor for stroke.(1) Effective management of AF and the associated stroke risk is important for reducing additional mortality and morbidity risks that result from the condition. Oral anticoagulants (OACs) reduce the risk of stroke, but can cause major bleeding events which may result in death or severe disablement. (2) They are also relatively expensive, either directly due to drug acquisition costs in the case of newer drugs like dabigatran, or indirectly due to monitoring costs in the case of warfarin. As a result of this, it is important to identify those patients for whom the benefits are most likely to outweigh the risks, and so a range of diagnostic tools are used to identify patients higher risk patients, including clinical prediction rules using patient history and characteristics.

The decision to prescribe OACs depends on clinical judgement about whether the decreased risk of stroke outweighs the increased risk of severe side effects, in particular potentially fatal major bleeding events. Presently, the assessment about the balance of risks is made using a clinical prediction rule such as CHADS2 and CHA2DS2-VASc, which use demographic and clinical characteristics to produce a stroke risk score. If this score is at or exceeds a threshold, the decision to prescribe OACs is made.

This study assesses whether performing an additional, slightly more expensive diagnostic test in all newly diagnosed AF patients would lead to better clinical outcomes on average (clinical effectiveness). If such additional testing is clinically effective, it is also important to evaluate whether the additional health benefits are proportionate to the additional costs accrued, and the additional testing is cost effective at standard NICE decision-making thresholds. The additional diagnostic test of interest is transthoracic echocardiography (TTE), a non invasive procedure that allows imaging of the heart and blood flow.

In this study a discrete event simulation (DES) model was developed to model the long-term implications of performing TTEs in all newly diagnosed AF patients when making the decision whether to prescribe OACs. Dabigatran was selected as the OAC to model, as it has recently been recommended for use in this population group by NICE (3), and carries a lower bleed risk than warfarin.(4) Patients whom the prediction rule would suggest are of lowest stroke risk, and so would not normally be prescribed OAC, are also assessed using TTE. If TTE identifies at least one type of left atrial abnormality (LA ABN), which has been shown to lead to an increased stroke risk,(5) then they are also prescribed OACs. As a result of this, more people will be prescribed OACs when TTE is included in the diagnostic package than when it is not, so any potential cost savings would be as a result of preventing strokes and the costs to the NHS that result from them.

## Methods

The mathematical model developed estimated the effect of performing TTE in all newly diagnosed 60 year old males with AF, on the decision to prescribe dabigatran and outcomes following this decision, compared with just using one of two related clinical prediction rules (described later) to make this decision. Males aged under 65 were considered because being female and being aged 65 or older are risk factors according to the more sensitive of the two clinical prediction rules (CHA2DS2­-VASc), and so would lead to a decision to prescribe OACs even in the absence of information from TTE. The health economic outcome of interest is the quality adjusted life year (QALY). An NHS perspective is adopted, so that costs incurred by the patient or wider society are not considered. Standard NICE discount rates for utilities and costs of 3.5% per annum are used. A lifetime horizon is adopted. In order to incorporate the effect of uncertainty on predicted outcomes, a probabilistic model is used, so that where possible model parameter estimates are drawn from distributions rather than assumed to be fixed values. The central estimates were derived by taking mean values from probabilistic sensitivity analyses, rather than from a deterministic model run, in order to incorporate nonlinearities between model parameters and outcomes.

An overview of the model is presented in . The model involves both a short-term diagnostic stage and long-term patient outcome stage. In the short-term stage the clinical characteristics of a patient are generated, and the decision whether or not to prescribe OAC is made. In the long-term simulation the patient’s clinical outcomes are simulated. Over the patient lifetime the patient may experience a stroke or major bleeding event, or a death from another cause. Each of these events have associated costs and utilities. By following the outcomes for a large number of patients, the average associated costs and utilities following both diagnostic strategies (baseline, without TTE, and comparator, with TTE) were estimated, allowing estimation of the mean costs and mean QALYs for both strategies, and so the incremental cost effectiveness ratio (ICER) of including TTE in the diagnostic package.



Figure Graphical representation of the mathematical model

The criteria and scoring systems used by the two baseline strategies are shown in Table 1 below. The CHADS2 instrument produces a risk score for each patient ranging from zero to six points inclusive, and CHA2DS2-VASc assigns patients a score ranging from zero to nine points inclusive. In both cases, it is assumed a patient assigned a risk score of one or more point would be prescribed dabigatran. As a result of this, CHA2DS2-VASc is a more inclusive clinical prediction rule.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| CHADS2 | | | CHA2DS2-VASC | | |
| Code | Condition | Points | Code | Condition | Points |
| C | Congestive heart failure | 1 | C | Congestive heart failure | 1 |
| H | Hypertension | 1 | H | Hypertension | 1 |
| A | Age ≥ 75 years | 1 | A2 | Age ≥ 75 years | 2 |
| D | Diabetes mellitus | 1 | D | Diabetes mellitus | 1 |
| S­­­2 | Prior stroke or TIA | 2 | S­­­2 | Prior stroke or TIA | 2 |
|  | | | V | Vascular disease | 1 |
| A | Age 65-74 years | 1 |
| Sc | Sex category (female) | 1 |

Table 1 CHADS2 and CHA2DS2-VASc

In the comparator strategy, information from TTE is used alongside that from the standard clinical prediction rule, and so the decision to coagulate can also be made as a result of TTE identifying a structural feature of left atrial abnormality (LA ABN) that predisposes an individual to a high risk of stroke(5). LA ABN is defined as a patient having either a left atrial appendage thrombi, a dense spontaneous echo contrast, or left atrial appendage low flow velocities. (6)

The short term model looks at the effect of including TTE in the diagnostic strategy on the proportion of newly diagnosed AF patients from four mutually exclusive and exhaustive patient groups. These groups are defined as: 1) true positives (TPs): patients where the high risk feature LA ABN was correctly identified, and as a result would receive dabigatran. 2) true negatives (TNs): patients with a clinical prediction score of zero, who also do not have an LA ABN, and whom TTE does not misclassify as having LA ABN. These patients currently do not receive the OAC, and for this patient group this is the correct decision. 3) False positives (FPs): Patients with a clinical prediction score of zero whom TTE misclassifies as having a LA ABN. As a result of this, using TTE would lead to these patients being given OACs even though for them this would be the wrong decision. 4) False negatives (FNs): Patients with a clinical prediction score of zero, but a LA ABN that TTE has failed to identify. These patients would not receive OACs even though for them prescribing OACs would be the correct decision. The clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of using TTE is a function of the mixture of these four patient groups within the patient population, which is itself a function of 1) the true proportion of patients with a clinical prediction score of zero who have LA ABN and are thus at substantially higher stroke risk than predicted (‘True Proportion High Risk’ or TPHR); and 2) the sensitivity and specificity of TTE in identifying TPHR individuals. The derivation of these four patient groups in the population mix is defined in below. Within the context of the model, the baseline strategy (no TTE) can be considered a diagnostic strategy with a sensitivity of zero and a specificity of one, so the baseline population mix is comprised of TPHR% false negative and 1-TPHR% true negative.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Population Type | Proportion of total population |
| True Positive | TPHR x sensitivity |
| True Negative | (1 – TPHR) x specificity |
| False Positive | (1 – TPHR) x (1 – specificity) |
| False Negative | TPHR x (1 – sensitivity) |

Table Defining the population mix.

A full list of the information used to populate the parameters in the model, including event risks, costs and utilities, is presented in below.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Category** | **Description** | **References** |
| **Risks/Probabilities** | Death from other causes | Nonparametric | UK Lifetables. (7) |
| Sensitivity and Specificity of TTE in detecting LA ABN | Jointly estimated from Dirichlet distribution  (FN, TP, TN, FP) =  (5, 87, 83, 159) | Table 2 of (6) |
| Proportion of patients with LA ABN | Beta(2.5, 22.5) for CHADS2  Beta(0.5, 11.5) for CHA2DS2-VASc  (Both with prior of 0.5 added to both cell counts.) | Table 2 of (6) |
| Annual stroke risk by CHADS2 score | Simulated from Lognormal distribution | (8) |
| Annual stroke risk by CHA2DS2-VASc score | Assumed identical to risk by CHADS2 score | (8) |
| Annual stroke risk in those with LA ABN | Simulated from Lognormal distribution | (9) |
| Relative risk (RR) of stroke in patients receiving dabigatran | Indirect comparison simulation approach | (10) for RR of warfarin compared with placebo  (4) for RR of dabigatran compared with warfarin |
| Annual major bleeding risk for patients receiving dabigatran | Statified by age. Credible interval calculated using simulation approach | (4) |
| Outcome following stroke | Simulation & mapping based approach | Method described in companion paper [Ref], using results published in (11) |
| Outcome following a major bleeding event | Previous estimates | (12) |
| **Utilities** | Baseline utilities by age and gender | Regression based approach | (13) |
| Utility multiplier following stroke, utility multiplier following major non-fatal intracranial bleed | Simulation & mapping based approach | Method described in companion paper [Ref], using results published in (11) |
| **Costs** | Annual cost of dabigatran | £821.25 | (14) |
| Cost of TTE | £66 | (15) |
| Cost of death due to stroke | £7,019 (95% CrI £6,975 to £7,064) | (16) |
| Costs in stroke survivors | Various. Differing according to dependent and independent states. Subdivided into ongoing and continuing costs | (15)(17)(18) |
| Costs of fatal bleed | Assumed identical to costs of death due to stroke | |
| Costs of nonfatal bleed | VariousDepends on whether bleed is gastrointestinal or intracranial. If intracranial, depends on severity of resulting disability | (15) |

Table Parameters used in model

Three mutually exclusive outcomes could result from a stroke: death, a dependent state, and an independent state. Each outcome has different utilities, probabilities and costs. Similarly, three mutually exclusive outcomes could result from a major bleeding event: death, an intracranial (IC) bleeding event, or a non-intracranial (NIC) bleeding event (assumed to be a gastrointestinal bleed). The severity of an IC bleed can vary substantially, and this variation of outcomes was itself simulated using data based on outcomes categorized by GOS score following traumatic brain injury. The full methodology used to produce these estimates is presented elsewhere (21)

The DES is dynamically updated when events occur that affect an individual’s CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc score, or other characteristics that affect their stroke or bleed risk. For example, when the patient reaches an age of 65, their CHA2DS2-VASc score increases by one; at age 75 their score increases by one CHADS2 point, and their CHA2DS2-VASc score by an additional point. A stroke leads to an increment of two points on the CHADS2/CHA2DS2-VASc score. If a patient suffers a major bleeding event after taking OACs, they stop being prescribed the OACs, leading to the risk of bleeds reducing to zero, but the risk of stroke increasing. If a patient experiences a stroke and are not already taking an OAC, they are prescribed OACs, provided they have not experienced a previous bleeding episode. If a patient suffers a severe intracranial haemorrhage (Glasgow outcome scale category 2) as a result of taking OACs, their life expectancy was reduced to a maximum of 3.4 years with no QALY gain. Additionally, the risk of a major bleeding event when taking dabigatran (150mg twice daily) was also assumed to change at the age of 75.

The costs and QALYs associated with the simulated patient experiences following both baseline (without TTE) and comparator (with TTE) strategies were used to estimate the incremental cost effectiveness ratio (ICER) of the comparator strategies compared with the baseline strategies, and so the cost-effectiveness of TTE in this context. The probability that the comparator strategy is cost-effective at a wide range of maximum acceptable incremental cost effectiveness ratios (MAICERS) is presented in the form of cost-effectiveness acceptability curves (CEACs) and cost-effectiveness acceptability frontiers (CEAFs), and the probability of being cost-effective at the commonly quoted threshold of £20,000 per QALY is reported.

The expected value of perfect information (EVPI) was calculated. This provides the maximum level of investment that a funding body would be prepared to pay to eliminate all uncertainty in the decision problem.(22) In calculating EVPI an estimation of the number of patients who will be affected by the decision is required. Assuming that the incidence of AF was 1 per 1,000 person years (approximately the pooled rate for women and men aged 55 to 64 years reported by the Renfrew Paisley study),(23) that there are 6.7 million people aged between 55 and 64 years in England and Wales,(24) that 6% of people are in the CHADS2 0 category,(6) and that the information is relevant for 10 years, then around 70,000 people would benefit from there being no uncertainty regarding whether TTE is cost effective.

Sensitivity analyses were also undertaken on two key parameters, the TPHR, and the joint uncertainty in the sensitivity and specificity of TTE in detecting LA ABN.

## Results

shows the shows the simulated patient experience when TTE is added to either CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc, in terms of clinical events. These suggest that using information from TTE increases the expected life of patients, and increases the proportion of patients that die of non stroke- or bleed-related causes. An initial TTE reduces the estimated number of strokes but at the expense of a greater number of bleeds.

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|  | |  | Cause of Death (%) | | | Average Number of Events | | | |
|  | Strategy | Life Years | Stroke | Bleed | Other | Dep. Strokes | Ind. Strokes | ICH | NICH |
| CHADS2 | No initial treatment | 20.024 | 12.2 | 1.4 | 86.4 | 0.115 | 0.262 | 0.011 | 0.082 |
| TTE with those diagnosed with LA ABN  treated | 20.175 | 10.9 | 1.8 | 87.3 | 0.104 | 0.235 | 0.014 | 0.109 |
| CHA2DS2-VASc | No initial treatment | 19.777 | 14.6 | 1.6 | 83.9 | 0.140 | 0.311 | 0.012 | 0.092 |
| TTE with those diagnosed with LA ABN  treated | 19.823 | 14.0 | 1.9 | 84.1 | 0.136 | 0.298 | 0.014 | 0.111 |
| TTE = Transthoracic Echocardiography; LA ABN = Left Atrial Abnormality; ICH = Intracranial haemorrhage; NICH = Non- intracranial haemorrhage | | | | | | | | | |

Table Simulated patient experience: patients with a clinical prediction rule score of 0

shows the costs, QALYs, and ICERs associated with the simulated patient experiences presented in . For CHADS2, the mean cost per QALY of below £6000 indicates that TTE is likely to be a cost effective use of resources. For CHA2DS2-VASc, the mean cost per QALY of almost £50,000 suggests TTE is not likely to be cost-effective in this context. The 95% credible intervals for the ICERs range from dominating to almost £30,000 per QALY for CHADS2, and from less than £6,000 to dominated for CHA2DS2-VASc. These correspond directly to the joint estimation of costs and QALYs resulting from the PSA, as shown in figure 2(a) and figure 2(b). For figure 2(a) (CHADS2), a significant proportion of the estimates are in the south east quadrant, indicating simple dominance over the baseline strategy. For figure 2(b) (CHA2DS2-VAsc), a significant proportion of the estimates are in the north-west quadrant, indicating that the comparator strategy (CHA2DS2-VASc with TTE) is dominated by the baseline strategy (CHA2DS2-VASc alone).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Strategy | | Cost | QALYs | Incremental Cost | Incremental QALYs | Cost per QALY  (2.5th and 97.5th percentiles) |
| CHADS2 | No initial treatment | £13,792 | 10.185 |  |  |  | |
| TTE with those diagnosed with LA ABN treated | £15,646 | 10.502 | £1,854 | 0.317 | £5847  (Dominating -£28,939) | |
| CHA2DS2-VASc | No initial treatment | £15,249 | 10.077 |  | | | |
| TTE with those diagnosed with LA ABN treated | £19,729 | 10.168 | £4480 | 0.091 | £49,491  (£5604 - Dominated) | |
| TTE = Transthoracic Echocardiography; LA ABN = Left Atrial Abnormality | | | | | | |

Table Cost effectiveness of the use of TTE in patients with a CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc score of 0

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| Dab_C0_PSA.jpeg | Dab_CV0_PSA.jpeg |
| CHADS2 | CHA2DS2-VASc |

Figure PSA scatterplot

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Dab_C0_ceac.jpeg | Dab_CV0_ceac.jpeg |
| CHADS2 | CHA2DS2-VASc |

Figure Cost Effectiveness Acceptability Curves

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Dab_C0_ceaf.jpeg | Dab_CV0_ceaf.jpeg |
| CHADS2 | CHA2DS2-VASc |

Figure Cost Effectiveness Acceptability Frontiers

Figures 4a and 4b shows the cost-effectiveness acceptability frontiers (CEAFs) associated with CHADS2 and CHA2DS2-VASc respectively. Figure 4a indicates that the comparator strategy (CHADS2 + TTE, shown as a solid line) becomes the optimal strategy, compared with CHADS2 alone (the dashed line) at a willingness to pay threshold of £5847 or more per QALY gained. Conversely, figure 4b indicates that the comparator strategy (CHA2DS2-VASc +TTE) has a low likelihood of being the optimal decision at threshold of lower than £50,000 per QALY gained, compared with CHA2DS2-VASc alone (the dashed line).

Figures 5a and 5b show, respectively, the per patient EVPI of TTE compared with CHADS2 alone and CHA2DS­2-VASc alone. It is seen that there is most uncertainty at maximum acceptable incremental cost effectiveness ratios (MAICERs) close to the value at which TTE becomes cost effective. As the MAICER increases the value of EVPI falls substantially. Assuming that there are 70,000 people who would benefit from no uncertainty in the decision problem, the expected value of perfect information would be in the region of £5 million assuming a MAICER of £20,000 per QALY when using CHADS2 alone; the equivalent figure for CHA2DS2-VASc is in the region of £28 million.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Dab_C0_evpi.jpeg | Dab_CV0_evpi.jpeg |
| CHADS2 | CHA2DS2-VASc |

Figure Expected Value of Perfect Information per patient

Figure 6a and 6b indicate the effect that different assumptions about the TPHR within the subgroup of the population with CHADS2 scores of zero and CHA2DS2-VASc scores of zero, respectively. For CHADS2 (Figure 6a) it is seen that at low proportions of patients with LA ABN that TTE is cost effective; even at zero percent TTE is cost effective indicating that there is an apparent benefit in treating those with a CHADS2 score of zero even when the patient does not have LA ABN. Conversely, for CHA2DS2-VASc (Figure 6b) it is seen that the proportion of patients with LA ABN needs to be close to 12.5% in order for the cost per QALY of TTE to be near £20,000. At present there are very little data on this parameter with 0 of 11 patients with a CHA2DS2-VASc score of 0 having LA ABN.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| C:\Users\User\AppData\Local\Temp\HR_Dab_C0.jpeg | C:\Users\User\AppData\Local\Temp\HR_Dab_CV0.jpeg |
| CHADS2 | CHA2DS2-VASc |

Additional analyses were undertaken to identify the effect of different sensitivity and specificity assumptions on the expected ICERs. These indicated that, when CHADS2 was the comparator strategy, incorporating TTE appeared cost effective or even dominating for almost all possible sensitivity and specificity values except where specificity tends to one and sensitivity tends to zero (i.e. where TTE is assumed to have the same diagnostic properties as no TTE). However, where CHA2DS2-VASc was the comparator strategy, including TTE in the diagnostic decision only appeared cost effective at a threshold of £20,000 or less where both sensitivity and specificity were assumed to be close to perfect.

### Summary

These results indicate that the cost effectiveness of TTE in this context depends on the baseline strategy assumed, with results indicating TTE is cost effective when compared with CHADS2 alone, but not when compared with CHA2DS2-VASc alone.

## Discussion

This model indicates that, when it was assumed that the CHADS2 tool was used, the addition of TTE with the aim of identifying patients with LA ABN was deemed cost effective with the mean cost per QALY below £20,000 for all analyses and a low probability of the cost per QALY being greater than £20,000. Conversely, when the CHA2DS2-VASc tool was used, the addition of a TTE was not considered cost effective with the mean cost per QALY being greater than £30,000 for all analyses, and often considerably higher. However, there is considerable uncertainty in this conclusion due to the dearth of data, particularly in the proportion of patients with LA ABN and a CHA2DS2-VASc score of 0, as there were only 11 patients with a CHA2DS2-VASc of zero.

The model has a range of shortcomings and limitations. Assumptions have been made within the modelling. For example, the risk of stroke associated with a CHA2DS2-VASc score was assumed to be equal to that associated with the identical CHADS2 score, which is incorrect as the CHA2DS2-VASc is incremented by one when the person is 65 years, with the corresponding age for a unit increment in the CHADS2 score is 75 years. The dose of dabigatran was set at 150mg twice daily, rather than allowing some patients to receive a lower dose of 110mg twice daily; the model could be adapted to reduce the dose when a patient reaches a specified age. The stroke risk associated with patients with left atrial abnormalities is assumed to be constant at 8.0% (95% CI: 7.26 – 8.31) per year; ideally differential rates by age or by the number (and type) of abnormalities would be used but these data were not identified.

Perhaps a stronger assumption made in producing the model is that TOE is a perfect gold standard against which the sensitivity and specificity of TTE should be derived. Using this assumption, TTE was estimated to have a very high sensitivity but a specificity of only around 35%. Within this model, this low specificity corresponds to an increased proportion of ‘false positives’ being included in the patient population mix, and so TTE results in more people effectively experiencing increased risks of OACs in terms of bleed risks without corresponding increased benefits in terms of stroke risk reduction. If TTE were found to be superior to TOE at identifying certain types of LA ABN which expose patients to increased stroke risks, then this modeling assumption may be inaccurate, and the true benefits of TTE in improving patient management would be underestimated. The key data on which this economic evaluation is based – sensitivity, specificity, and TPHR – is a relatively small study, of fewer than 400 patients, and in the group of interest, those patients who would be given a CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc score of 0, fewer than 25 patients, and fewer than 80 patients with a CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc score of 1. This has made the assessment of the benefits of TTE uncertain, particularly in addition to the use of CHA2DS2-VASc, which had the fewer number of patients.

Other limitations include that there were no data relating the risk of stroke with CHA2DS2-VASc score, and this was approximated using the risk of stroke associated with CHADS2 score; that the risk of death unrelated to bleeding or stroke events was taken from lifetables and were not adjusted for the probability of bleeding or stroke mortality; and that the patient groups analysed within the model was limited, being males aged 60 with a CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc score of 0 or 1.

Prior to producing this model, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify, summarise and appraise existing economic studies for evaluating the cost-effectiveness of TTE in patients with AF. This review identified no economic evaluations of TTE in AF patients, so it is believed that this is the first.

### Implications for Research

Sensitivity analyses indicated that the model’s cost-effectiveness estimates depend heavily on sensitivity and specificity estimates, as well as the true proportion of genuinely high risk (LA ABN positive) patients in this sub population of apparently ‘low risk’ patients. Whether it is valuable to do more research to reduce estimation uncertainty depends on whether this is likely to lead to a significant reduction in decision uncertainty. EVPI analyses suggest that further research may be cost-effective when CHADS2 alone is used as the baseline strategy, but not when CHA2DS2-VASc is the baseline strategy. However, the model depends strongly on data reported in a single, relatively small study conducted outside of the UK, and so may under-represent the true level of uncertainty we have about sensitivity, specificity and TPHR.

A strong assumption made in the model is that the risk of stroke associated with each CHA2DS2-VASc score correspond exactly with each CHADS2 score. This is internally inconsistent as CHADS2 assigns one additional points for being aged 75 or over whereas CHA2DS2-VASc assigns two points for being this age, and made because equivalent CHA2DS2-VASc risk data was not identified. This data would improve the validity of the model.

A key uncertainty is whether there are other benefits that are accrued from a TTE other than identifying LA ABN. If these exist, and produce even small QALY gains (> 0.0033) then TTE would be cost effective in all scenarios. Any additional benefit of TTE further to those associated with treatment for stroke prevention also needs to be researched. Even small gains would equate to TTE being perceived as cost effective.

### Implications for clinical practice

The direct burden of routinely screening all newly diagnosed TTE patients is likely to be low. The additional resources required are relatively small, at an estimated £66 per TTE performed. It is likely that additional bed days are made available due to the reduction in stroke following appropriate management, although there is likely to be an increase in bleed related admissions. Should TTE be recommended for those patients with CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc scores of 0 or 1, this is unlikely to place a great burden on hospitals who are likely to have staff trained in the use of TTE machines. TTEs are relatively easily available as well as both safe and non-invasive for patients, with staff trained in their use likely to be already available in hospitals.

This model considers TTE as part of a diagnostic strategy. As such, TTE can only affect clinical outcomes indirectly, through its effect on the treatment options selected as a result of it. Recent changes in the recommended OAC for AF patients, from warfarin to dabigatran, have led to changes in the added value of TTE in this context, as it has changed the proportion of patients where the new information from TTE is likely to make a difference to clinical management. Because dabigatran appears safer than warfarin, but is noninferior in terms of stroke risk reduction, the OAC is prescribed at a lower stroke risk threshold (one CHADS2 point rather than two for warfarin), and so information from TTE makes a difference for fewer AF patients, who are less likely to be of a genuinely high risk of stroke. This moving of the ‘tipping point’ (25) has meant that TTE has become less valuable in this context even as the technology has improved. However, TTE may have value for this population in other decision-making contexts, which this model has not explored. Given the very small one-off cost of a single TTE test in the context of large ongoing costs of lifelong patient management for people with AF, TTE may represent a cost-effective use of resources overall even if not when making the OAC decision.

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