

## Original Article

## Rheumatology Assistance Care in Catalonia (Spain): Year 2012<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To determine the current state of rheumatology in Catalonia (Spain) and to update information regarding previous studies.

**Methods:** Study design: observational, descriptive and transversal. Sample: physicians practicing rheumatology in the public system of Catalonia. An epidemiological questionnaire was sent to all rheumatologists. The results were compared with previously published studies.

**Results:** Information was obtained on 130 rheumatologists (62 men/68 women, mean age  $47 \pm 9$  years). Seventy-five (57.7%) physicians worked at a hospital, 5 (3.8%) in primary care and 50 (38.5%) in both. Seven (11.9%) hospitals had no rheumatologist. Eight hospitals were accredited by the National Commission to develop a training program in Rheumatology. The number of residents accredited by each hospital was variable.

**Conclusions:** The number of rheumatologists in the public health sector in Catalonia has increased 4.8% during the last seven years, unlike the 2005 study in which there was an increase of 40% over the previous eight years. There were 7 hospitals without a rheumatologist.

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### Asistencia reumatológica en el sector sanitario público de Cataluña: año 2012

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Determinar el estado actual de la reumatología en Cataluña, actualizando la información respecto los estudios previos.

**Métodos:** Se trata de un estudio observacional, descriptivo y transversal. La muestra incluye a todos los médicos que ejercen actividad asistencial reumatológica en Cataluña. Se elaboró un cuestionario específico para el estudio y se remitió a todos los participantes. Los resultados se compararon con los resultados obtenidos en los estudios previos.

**Resultados:** Se obtuvo información acerca de 130 reumatólogos (62 varones/68 mujeres; edad media:  $47 \pm 9$  años). La asistencia en reumatología se ejercía de la siguiente manera: 75 (57,7%) médicos trabajaban en el ámbito hospitalario, 5 (3,8%) en la atención primaria y 50 (38,5%) en ambos. En 7 (11,9%) hospitales no había reumatólogo. Ocho hospitales estaban acreditados por la Comisión Nacional de la Especialidad de Reumatología para la formación de reumatólogos mediante el programa MIR.

**Conclusiones:** El número de reumatólogos en el sector sanitario público de Cataluña solo ha aumentado un 4,8% en los últimos 7 años, a diferencia del estudio realizado en 2005, en el que se incrementó un 40% respecto a los 8 años previos. Actualmente, aún hay un hospital universitario sin reumatólogo.

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## Palabras clave:

Reumatología

Asistencia

Cataluña

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### Introduction

Rheumatology is the medical specialty devoted to musculoskeletal diseases. It includes the study of connective tissue diseases, inflammatory arthritis, metabolic and bone disease and soft tissue rheumatism. The importance of musculoskeletal diseases is supported by a recent study that highlights the overall global burden of these problems,<sup>1</sup> where musculoskeletal diseases are of the 3 leading causes of mortality and morbidity along with mental disorders and endocrine diseases. One-third of the

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general world population has some rheumatic diseases; therefore, it is important to determine the number of rheumatologists working in Catalonia and what their welfare and working conditions are today. So far, three studies have been performed in order to know the status of rheumatology care in Catalonia,<sup>2-4</sup> both in hospitals and in primary care. The *Catalan Society of Rheumatology* (CSR) promotes this type of studies, to improve the quality of patient care with medical musculoskeletal diseases.

The objective of this study is to determine the current status of rheumatology in Catalonia and evaluate change from previous studies by the CSR itself.

## Methods

The study was an observational, descriptive, cross-sectional design with data collected from February 1, 2012 to April 30, 2012. The sample for the study was practicing rheumatologists with assistance care activity in Catalonia. Information was obtained by the listing of members of the CSR and the list of hospitals included in the *Catalan Health Service* (CHS). The CHS includes the *Institut Català de la Salut* and the centers run by the *Xarxa d'Utilització Pública Hospital*.

We telephoned all hospitals requesting the number of rheumatologists and contact modality preference (preferably email). 143 rheumatologists' emails were obtained. Subsequently all members of the CSR and emails obtained by telephone were contacted (via email) sending them a letter and questionnaire. Mail was forwarded on 3 occasions for those who did not reply.

We designed a questionnaire that included the following: center's name and address, number of rheumatologists at the center, accreditation for the training of specialists and number, availability of skilled nursing in rheumatology, recent retirements, recession of contracts during the period 2010–2012, rheumatologist name, date of birth, title of specialist in rheumatology, year and way of obtaining annual state-board certification of resident physicians (MIR) or other means-type of professional activity (hospital, private or primary), degree of dedication to public rheumatic activity (complete >30 h/week, partial <30 h/week) and professional contract type (fixed, temporary, part time or otherwise).

Information was collected on the number of people of different health regions of Catalonia by *Pla de Salut de Catalunya* (2011–2015) published by the *Department for Health* and IDESCAT (Statistical Yearbook of Catalonia). Today Catalonia is an autonomous community with an estimated population of almost 7 and a half million people.

## Results

Information was collected on 138 physicians who practiced as rheumatologists in Catalonia. Six (4%) physicians exercised only in the private sector, one was registered as unemployed and one was devoted exclusively to research.

Thirty percent (94%) doctors (62 male/68 female with a mean age  $\pm$  standard deviation of  $47 \pm 9$  years) exercised their activity in the public sector. Fig. 1 shows the age distribution.

The process for obtaining the title of specialist in rheumatology was, in 114 (87.7%) cases, through the MIR and in 16 (12.3%) cases through other means.

Assistance care in rheumatology was exercised as follows: 75 (57.7%) doctors worked in hospitals, 5 (3.8%) in primary care and 50 (38.5%) in both. One hundred ten (84.6%) doctors worked full-time (more than 30 h/week) and 20 (15.4%) worked partial shifts. Seventy-eight (60%) were also practicing rheumatologists in the private sector.

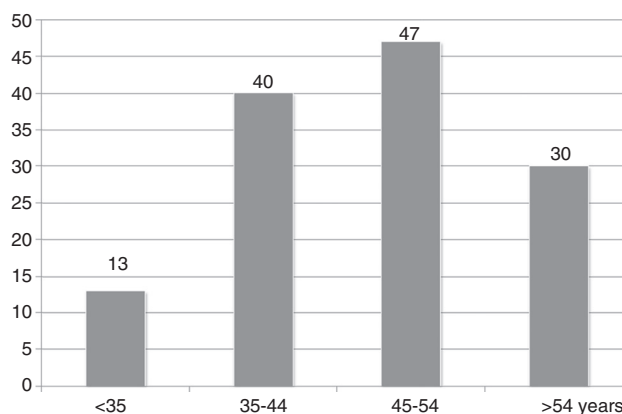


Fig. 1. Age distribution of rheumatologists in Catalonia during the period from February to April 2012.

Table 1  
Population by Rheumatologist in the Public Sector in Catalonia. Distribution by Province.

Barcelona	50 447 inhabitants/rheumatologist
Tarragona	73 935 inhabitants/rheumatologist
Lleida	73 728 inhabitants/rheumatologist
Girona	63 398 inhabitants/rheumatologist

The type of employment contract was: 105 (80.8%) fixed, 9 (6.9%) interim, 2 (1.5%) eventual and 14 (10.8%) with other types of contract, including scholarships, replacements and service fees, among others.

Rheumatology nurses were available only in 17 centers (33%), 3 cases only part-time. 2 hospitals had a nursing assistant.

In the period 2010–2012 there have been seven retirements, 3 of which have been completely replaced, one is 50% covered and one case has lost 8 h per week and in 2 cases there was depreciation of the post. In the same period there have been nine contract recessions, 8 of them in the health region of Barcelona and one in the health region of central Catalonia. Three rheumatology departments have been affected by layoffs in the last year.

Regarding the geographical distribution, 102 (78.4%) physicians practiced in the province of Barcelona, 11 (8.5%) in the province of Tarragona, 10 (7.7%) in the province of Girona and 5 (3.8%) in the province of Lleida. Two (1.6%) rheumatologists practiced in two provinces simultaneously. Table 1 shows the number of inhabitants per rheumatologist distributed by provinces.

The CHS includes 59 hospitals, 37 (62.7%) had full-time rheumatologists, but also partial in some cases, and 15 (25.4%) have only part-time rheumatologists. Seven (11.9%) hospitals did not have any rheumatologists. Table 2 shows hospitals that did not have a rheumatologist.

Table 2  
Hospital Centers That did not Have a Rheumatologist During the Period of February to April 2012 in the Public Sector in Catalonia.

<i>Región Sanitaria Alt Pirineu i Aran</i>	
Hospital Comarcal del Pallars	
Espitau Val d'Aran	
<i>Health Region of Girona</i>	
Hospital Universitari Dr. Josep Trueta de Girona	
Hospital de Campdevàrol	
Hospital Comarcal de Blanes	
<i>Barcelona Health Region</i>	
Fundació Hospital Comarcal St. Antoni Abat (Vilanova i la Geltrú)	
Center Hospitalari (Bages, Manresa)	

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