

Osteoarthritis patients may wait long time to see a specialist

Don Plant | Posted: Tuesday, October 28, 2014 9:56 pm

For people with a common form of arthritis, the wait to see a specialist in Kelowna is among the longest in the province, according to a new study.

Osteoarthritis, which occurs when cartilage wears away, affects one in 10 Canadian adults.

Those with the condition in the Central Okanagan must wait 240 days on average to consult with one of the four rheumatologists working in the region, says the BC Society of Rheumatologists.

“We get a lot of referrals from people who need help,” said society president Dr. Jason Kur. “You live long enough, almost everyone gets some form of osteoarthritis.”

Rheumatologists care for patients with auto-immune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, gout and musculo-skeletal problems such as

osteoarthritis. Two have offices in Penticton and none work in Vernon.

People with rheumatoid arthritis tend to get a referral far sooner because the disease affects more than their joints and it pays to treat them right away.

“We know intervention makes a difference,” Kur said.

“The days we had these gnarly, beaten-up hands from rheumatoid, which started in their 20s or 30s, doesn’t happen anymore because of the drugs we have.”

In Kelowna, patients with rheumatoid arthritis wait 33 days on average after booking to see a rheumatologist, which is exceptional, said Kur. National guidelines recommend patients wait no more than 90 days.

Osteoarthritis, however, is more challenging because it’s a degenerative process. Doctors have few



Rheumatologists president

Dr. Jason Kur says everyone will get osteoarthritis, if they live long enough. He’s the president of the BC Society of Rheumatologists.

tools to slow it down, other than recommending weight loss and strengthening. Still, people need care too, Kur said.

To conduct the study, the society invented two fake patients and sent their referrals to all 50-plus rheumatologists in the province.

One patient had early rheumatoid arthritis, which is urgent. The other was osteoarthritic, a condition considered less urgent.

The most severe shortages are in Surrey, Prince George and Kelowna, the study found. The average wait time for the osteoarthritic patient was 500 days in some rural areas.

“People travel a long way to see us often because there aren’t (services) in the smaller communities,” Kur said.

The society plans to take the findings and work with stakeholders to address care where the demand is greatest.