Evaluation of health advisory letter characteristics: Comparing the UK to Canada and the US

David de Launay1,2, Simon Parlow BSc1, Matthew Hogel PhD2, Margaret Watson PhD MSc BSc (Hons) MRPharmS3, Donald Mattison MD1,4, Carlos Rojas-Fernandez PharmD5, Cody Black BSc2, Lise M. Bjerre MD PhD MCFP1,2

1University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada; 2Bruyère Research Institute, Ottawa, Canada; 3University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland; 4Risk Sciences International, Ottawa, Canada; 5University of Waterloo, Kitchener, Canada.

INTRODUCTION
- Health advisory letters (HALs) are issued by regulatory bodies to inform clinicians about newly identified safety hazards concerning particular medications
- We assessed HALs issued in the United Kingdom (UK)
- Building on previous research, we compared HALs from three international jurisdictions, the UK, Canada, and the United States (US)
- Of particular interest was the format of the UK HALs and the differences in timing of HALs across different jurisdictions

METHODS
- Study period: 2010-14 (inclusive)
- Safety-related medication updates targeted to prescribers identified in UK database (GOV.UK)
- HALs analyzed using assessment tool developed and piloted by research team

RESULTS
- The UK published 131 HALs during the study period
- This number was greater than the HALs published by both Canada (80) and the US (107) over the same timeframe
- Inter-rater reliability for UK HAL coding obtained 88% raw agreement and Cohen’s kappa = 0.76
- Across the three jurisdictions, 245 unique drug advisories were observed

DISCUSSION
- UK HALs have a moderately consistent format; an author was never listed, no obvious marketing techniques were present, letters were not written on company letterhead, and the inclusion of the name of the drug company was rare (n = 2)
- A very small number of HALs (n = 19) overlapped from the three jurisdictions over a five year period, raising important questions about discrepancies in drug safety in all three jurisdictions

CONCLUSION
- UK HALs have a fairly consistent format
- HALs differ in timing across Canada, the UK, and the US
- These differences across jurisdictions with otherwise similar approaches to the practice of medicine raise questions about the appropriateness and evidence-base underpinning HALs
- These findings also point to possible gaps in the availability of appropriate and clinically relevant medication information in all three jurisdictions
- These gaps need to be addressed to help ensure that medications can be used in a safer fashion
- Linguistic analysis of HALs across the three jurisdictions and what implications this may have on uptake of information is an area of interest for future research