

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

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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

UNITED KINGDOM HEALTH ADVISORY LETTERS

Figure 1. Sample GOV.UK health advisory letters (HALs)

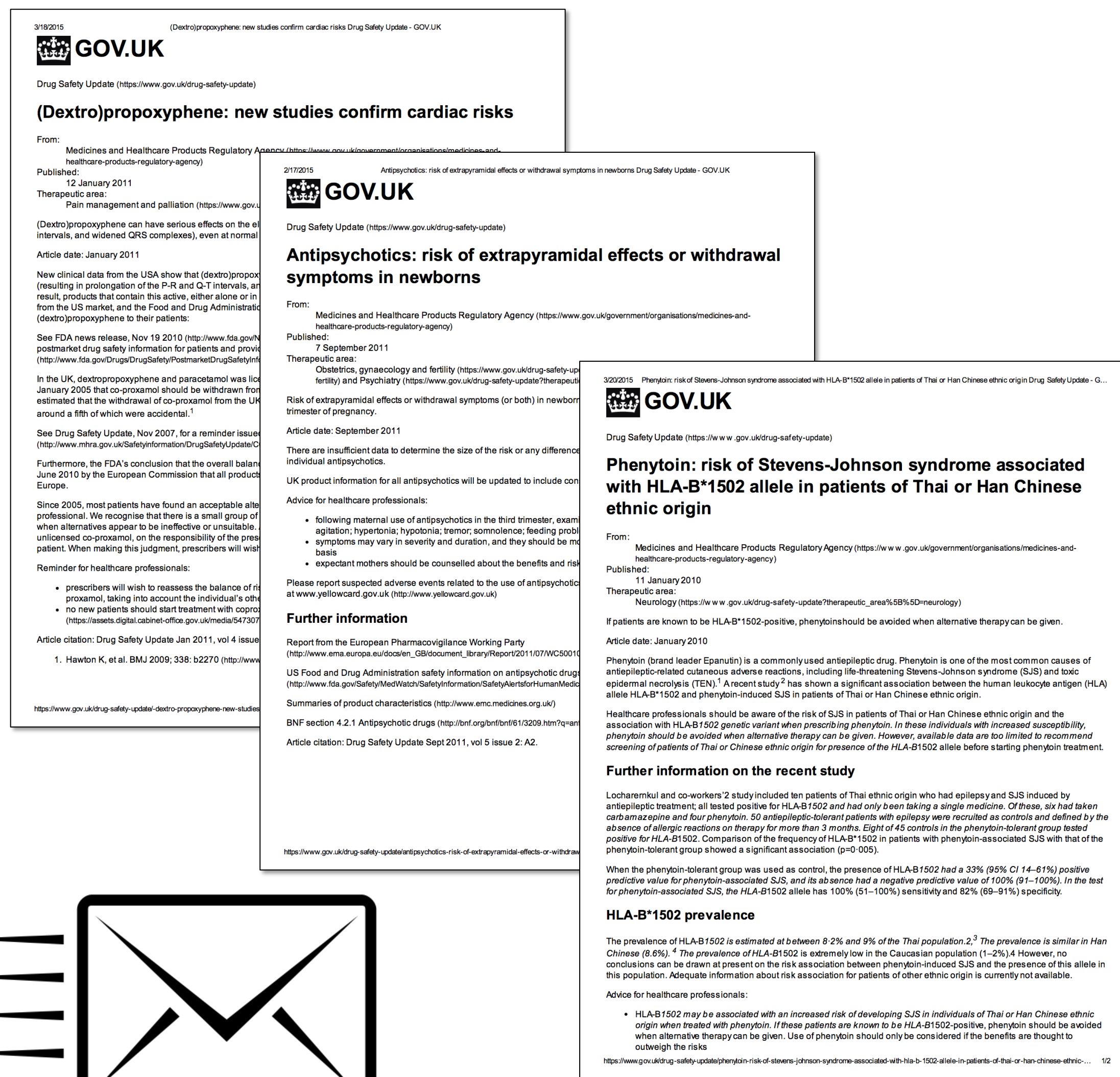


Figure 2. Drug-problem characteristics of UK HALs (n = 131)

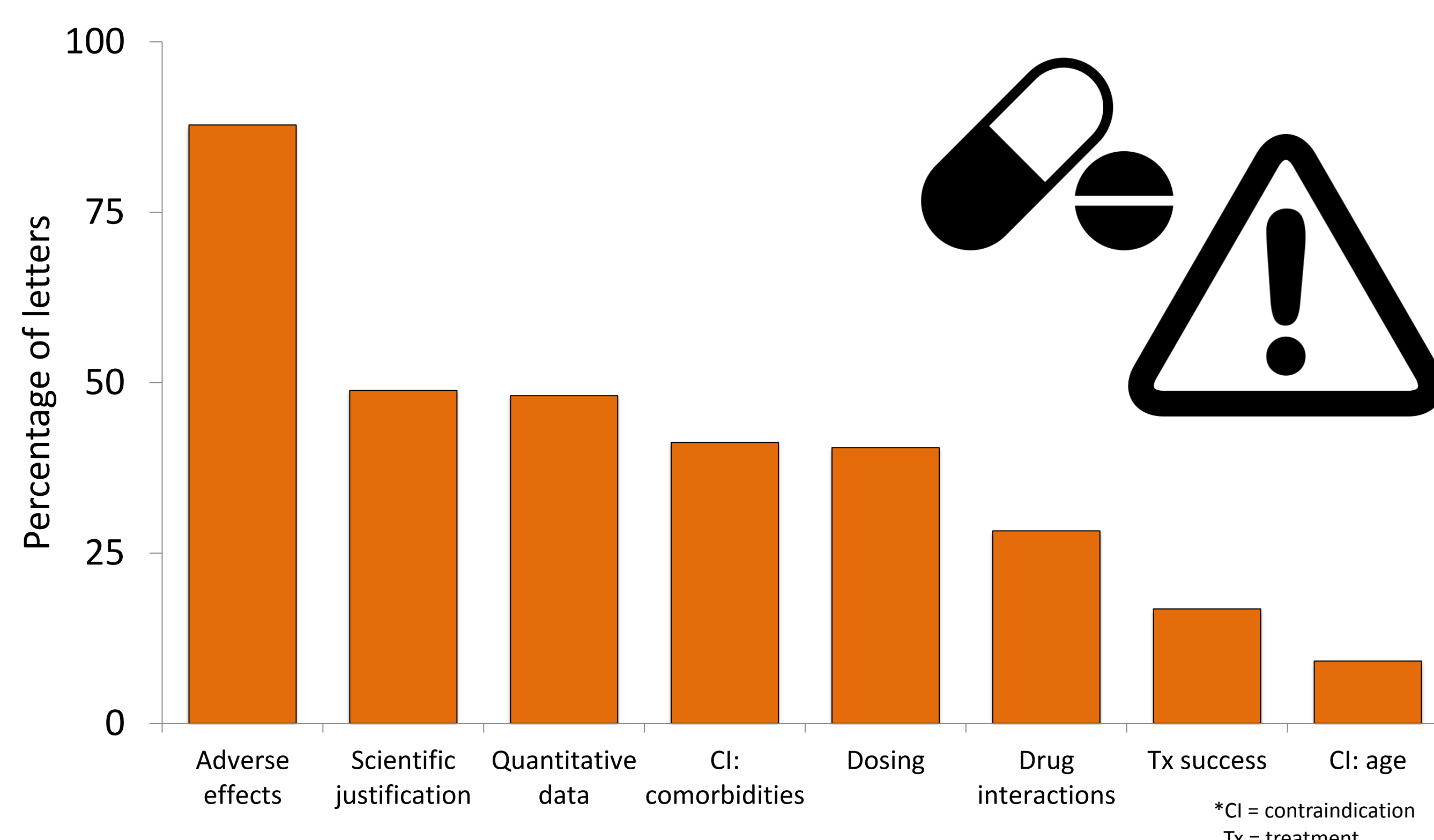
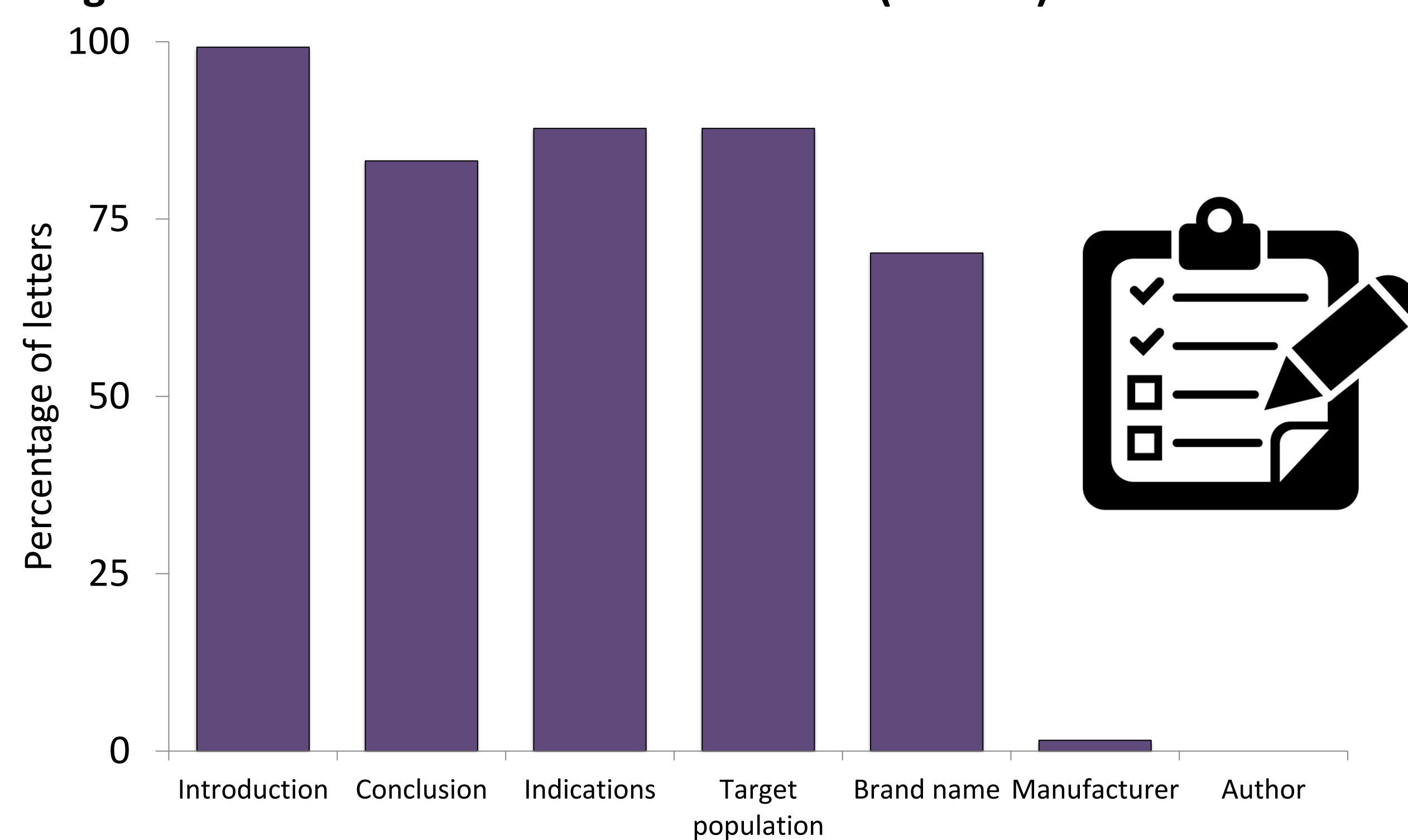


Figure 3. Other characteristics of UK HALs (n = 131)



COMPARISON ACROSS JURISDICTIONS

Figure 4. Overlap of HALs sent for unique drug advisories (n = 245) from Canada, the UK, and the US

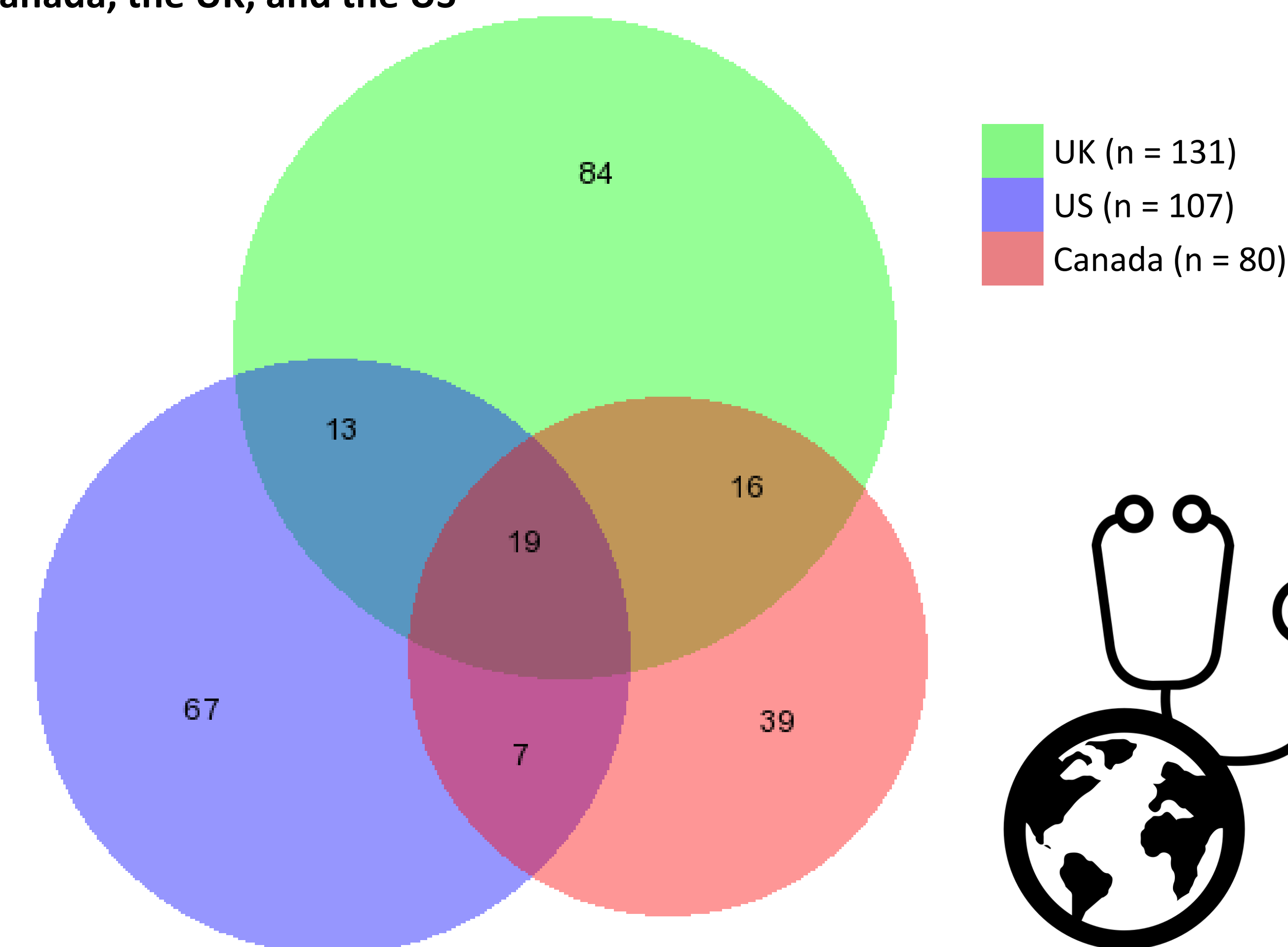
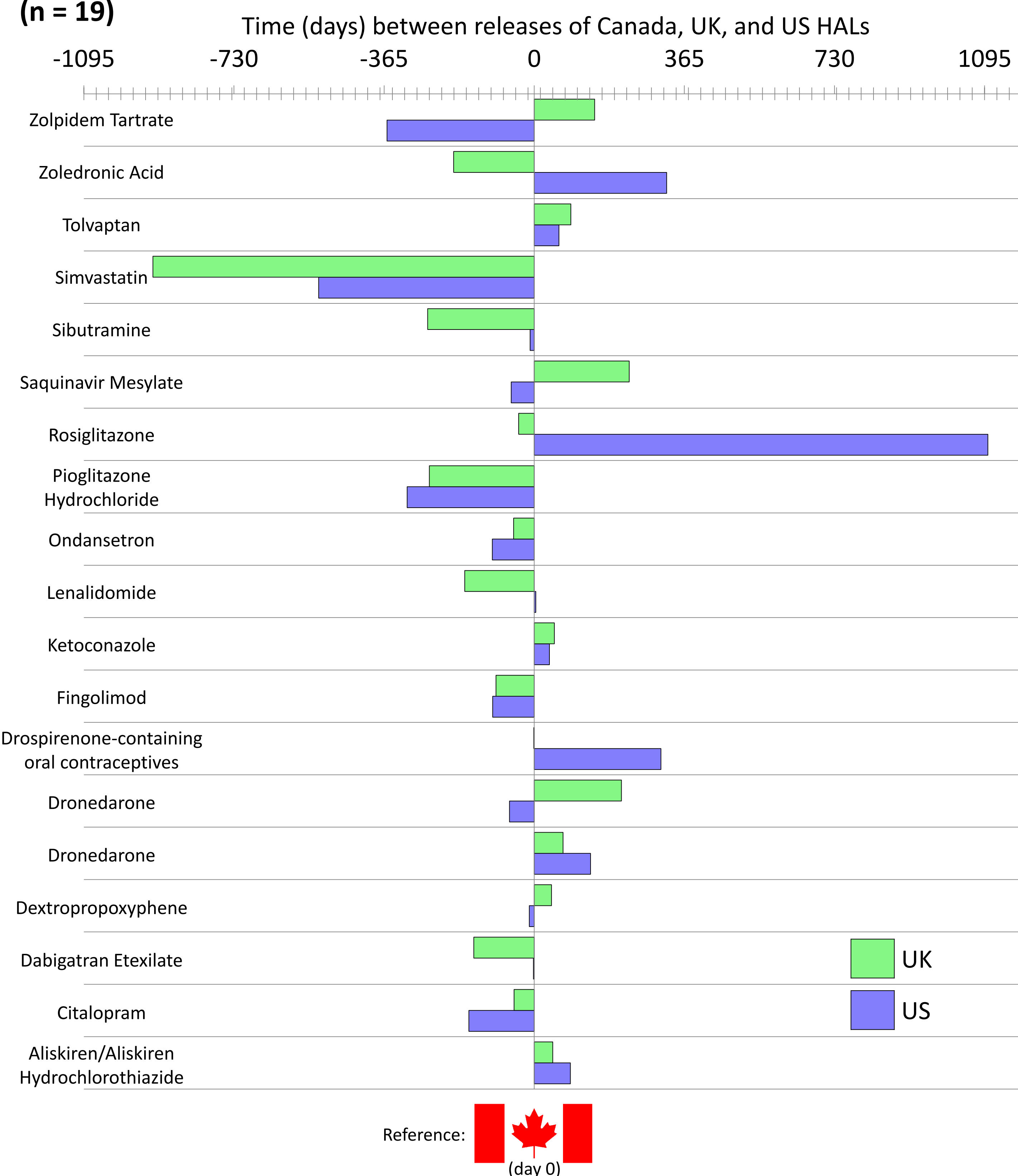


Figure 5. Timing (publication date) of overlapping Canada, UK, and US HALs (n = 19)



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

Venn diagram created using BioVenn by Tim Hulsen (<http://www.cmbi.ru.nl/cdd/biovenn/index.php>) Graphic credits: The Noun Project; Warning sign: Alain Loubet; Pills: Ken Messenger; Envelope: Phil Scott; Checklist: parkjison; Stethoscope: Daniel Nocht; Earth: Gregor Črešnar. Canada.pch.gc.ca: Canada flag.