

The Face Thymometer

-A simple measure of generic wellbeing for evidence-based commissioning.

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Abstract:

The Face Thymometer is a simple scale for grading personal feelings. It consists of a series of emoticons with geometrically proportionate expressions that can be used to subjectively score a wide range of issues such as the quality of Life and the usefulness of treatments etc. This paper retrospectively reviews over 12,000 instances of its use. It examines how valid such a simple and brief scale is for measuring wellbeing and compares its performance with other more established instruments.

Face Thymometry has a meaning that seems to be fully understood by both patients and members of the general public and in many studies it was the least omitted data item. Thus, in general, this scale has "face validity". (Of interest was a finding that in the few patients who recorded mismatched or exaggerated smiles or frowns when compared with what was known about them clinically, personality difficulties were often present.)

Face Thymometry scores were found to correlate significantly and positively with the gold standard EuroQol 5D when measuring Quality of Life and they also showed a strongly positive and significant correlation with the Zung depression scale ($r_s = 0.7716$ $p < 0.00001$) however their correlation with McGill pain scores was less consistent. Variation in Hay fever symptoms, recorded by Thymometry, correlated significantly with ambient pollen counts establishing the biological validity of the scale.

In addition, this Faces scale works independently of language and culture and its brevity allows it to be administered via a touch screen auto-receptionist. This allows attending patients to routinely record their wellbeing and permit background comparison of quality of life before and after interventions. For population comparisons calculation of a "Bentham score" is proposed.

Thymometry might provide *subjective* information alongside Mortality, Morbidity and Service usage data; thus generating a comprehensive range of outcomes. Furthermore, outcomes derived from Thymometry are readily comprehensible to the general public and might play a persuasive role in outcome-based commissioning when more rigorous trial data is absent.

Introduction

Standardized, practical ways of measuring subjective outcomes are needed by Patients, Clinicians, Researchers, and Healthcare managers. Patients often like to know how well the treatments they are offered have symptomatically suited fellow sufferers. Clinicians generally feel this sort of subjective data is useful when recommending therapeutic choices. (Indeed because it is increasingly common for medical interventions to be given specifically to improve quality of life, having an easily applicable and understandable measure will help them prescribe with more confidence.) Furthermore those engaged in pragmatic health service research have a special need for tools that can be applied within the natural setting without disrupting normal clinical practice. Finally, Healthcare managers who have the task of allocating resources across a wide range of clinical interventions require patient-centered outcomes that are not specific to disease categories.

Unfortunately most of our existing tools for measuring subjective outcomes have intrinsic credibility problems and are often too verbal, specialized and detailed. They have been designed for scientific explanatory studies where specialist statistical assistance is required¹.

Hyland² discussed the selection of generic quality of life tools according to whether they were being used in a research or a clinical context and Ruta and colleagues³ have suggested six features that the ideal clinical tool should possess:

1. Measure the aspects and effects of the illness that the **patient** decides are most important;
2. Enable the **patient** to score the chosen variables;
3. Be a sensitive measure of within person change over time;
4. Be applicable to the whole spectrum of illness seen in primary care;
5. Be capable of measuring the effects of a wide variety of care;
6. Be brief and simple enough to complete in a 7-10 minute consultation.

The COOP-WONCA charts⁴ and the Andrews & Withey D-T scale⁵ go some way in meeting these requirements and have generated a wide bibliography supporting their cross-cultural use. However they have not become widely adopted in the clinical context, so it seems worthwhile to try to find alternatives that are more generally acceptable and might become standardized.

Method:

The aim of this work is to examine previous, often unpublished, studies to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Face Thymometry as a generic outcomes tool.

The Settings and Populations studied

Most of the studies reported here took place in 120 general practices in the Kingston & Richmond Health Authorities in London UK. The catchment area population was about a third of a million. The participating GPs were members of the "Kingston & Richmond Multifund" which in the mid 1990s was the originating model for today's Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs)

The Subjects

The major part of the analyses reported here was made on 11,230 routine consultations by patients from the above practices in 1995⁶. Kingston Upon Thames, in common with other parts of London, has a very racially diverse population. During the periods of data gathering (one to six months) no patients reported difficulty understanding the scale but some individual patients made more than one consultation. However due to analytic limitations, this repeat consultation was not quantified at the time. However the U.K. average annual consultation rate in the mid nineties was 3.9 per year.⁷ A more detailed contemporary analysis in the author's own practice was done looking at very high consulters, (defined as those attending 12 times or more each year). It was found that while these represented only some 4% of the practice list, they caused 20% of the consulting workload. A further examination of this high consulting 4% revealed that half merited the extra attention because they had serious medical problems such as cancer but the other half had no clear diagnoses and included many who might be classified as "Heart sink". This may assist in interpreting the populations in these studies.

The other populations examined here were either trial subjects or citizens of the Royal Borough of Kingston selected for a population study.

The instrument

The Face Thymometer differs from the 5-point diagrammatic COOP-WONCA charts⁴ in presenting a single eleven-point scale of geometrically precise faces. It retains the COOP-WONCA charts' independence from differences in culture, language and education but has greater

discriminating power when used as a generic measure to compare the value of interventions in any symptomatic condition.

The scale starts with a full down-turned semi-circle representing a frown with a subjective score of **0** (“-100%”) i.e. “Maximum Unhappiness”. In subsequent emoticons the arcs of the frown are reduced by intervals of 20% until it forms a straight line representing a subjective score of **5** (“0%”) or “neutral”. Thereafter it turns up into a smile increasing by the same 20% intervals until it becomes a fully upturned semi-circle representing a smile with a subjective score of **10** (“+100%”) or “Maximum Happiness” see **Fig 1**. Smaller increments of expression can be used but unless the scale is considerably enlarged any smaller differences are difficult to discriminate on touch-screens or paper questionnaires.

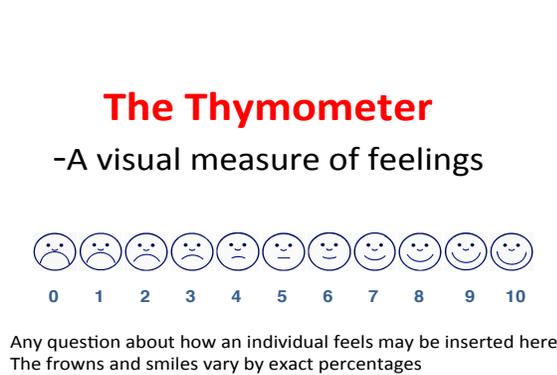


Fig 1 The basic Thymometer design

**Truncated
Thymometer in App**

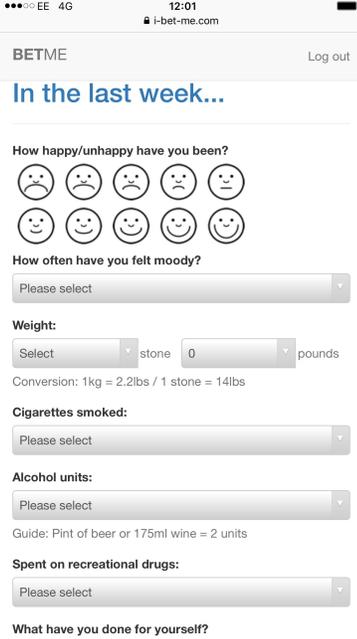


Fig 1.

Above is an example of how a truncated Face Thymometer is currently being used in a new App (2015) (<http://www.i-bet-me.com>) to measure the effect of using Contingency Management to reduce harmful habits. Participants must try to earn more “CareCredits” each week. These are awarded for taking better care of their Communities, their families and themselves.

Being a generic, rather than a condition-specific tool, the Face Thymometer requires users to *synthesize* how their current physical, psychological and social experiences are contributing to their wellbeing and to reflect this by their choice of a particular face.

However, unlike in metrics such as weight and height, individuals cannot measure their feelings by exact universally accepted intervals. Therefore, Thymometry and all similar scales behave intrinsically like “rubber rulers”. This situation has further complications because a few subjects appear to rate their feelings in either hyperbolic or over-conservative ways, which will be discussed later.

The study plan

There was no original study plan when these studies were started thirty years ago. The Thymometry scale was derived initially from the conventional 100mm analogue line being used by us in comparative studies of Hay Fever treatments¹³. We then compared it with some conventional measures of symptomatology such as the Zung⁸ Depression and the McGill Pain questionnaire.⁹ However attempts to compare it with the best -known generic instrument the SF36¹⁰ had to be abandoned because too few patients in these natural setting studies were prepared to fill in the very long SF36 forms provided. It is easy to agree with Jenkinson¹¹ "The SF-36 is not suitable for use within a consultation, which detracts from its clinical usefulness". Fortunately, EuroQol 5D has been validated against SF36¹² so the Euroquol has been employed as the comparison gold standard for Quality of Life. Examining old databases retrospectively has been challenging so occasionally additional specific studies have had to be done recently to fill-in gaps.

Using Thymometry to calculate a "Bentham Score"

Face Thymometry was used to assess concepts like "Treatment usefulness" and "Quality of Life". However, it was also used it to compare population differences; using a concept we are calling "the Absolute Bentham" after the great Utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham who argued for setting a target as "The greatest happiness for the greatest number."¹⁵ An "Absolute Bentham" in terms of Thymometry is scored when every individual in a population records a score of 10 (100%) (i.e. as happy as possible). Obviously most populations contain individuals who have lower than absolute scores. If all these individual scores are summated and taken as a proportion of the "Absolute Bentham" we get a proportion that is amenable to non-parametric statistical testing. More importantly when graphically presented even non-statistically trained people can "see for themselves" the results of evaluations. See **Fig 5**. Such an approach can also be used to display trends visibly.

Thymometry to measure Quality of Life and the "Usefulness" of interventions

In addition to these analytical issues, Thymometry has been applied to measure feelings about a wide range of verbal concepts as specified by appending different legends to the scale. Because using written English detracts from one of the scales virtues i.e. its cultural and literacy independence, legends are best delivered in a range of different written or spoken languages.

To capture the everyday concept of **Quality of Life** with Thymometry, we have used a touch screen in the waiting room administering, the simple social question,

"How are you today?"

The word "today" was included in the legend as it was time specific and prompted a considered assessment . The more vague "How are you?" could evoke a less considered polite reply.

*We used this question in our trial of Antidepressants (1999) **Fig 4** and again in our study to compare Thymometry with EuroQol (2015) **Table 1** and in assessing what "face difference" patients thought "important".*

For comparing Thymometry with McGill Pain scores (See **Table 1**) we used the legend

"Please tick the face which best shows how your pain is affecting your quality of life now"

We specified the meaning of “Quality of life” (QoL) by reference to the WHO definition that Health e.g. used in surveys in Multifund General Practices **Fig 3**.

“Health is social, mental and physical well-being. How happy are you with the way your health is affecting the quality of your life now?”

We also developed the concept of treatment **“Usefulness”**. This required each patient to record a Thymometry score for a treatment that synthesizes symptom relief, convenience of use and freedom from side effects viz.

Overall, how useful* has your prescription or therapy been so far?

** Usefulness is a measure of symptom relief, convenience of use and freedom from side effects*

More recently (2011) Thymometry has been used in studies on over 50 severe heroin abusers. Seventeen of these were asked the baseline question

“How happy have you been, in general, during the last month?”

With the aid of modern digital delivery systems, it is now possible to include a language translation facility. Viz. our current (2012-) on-line **Confidential Enquiry** in the One Norbiton Community regeneration project. In this study we are also employing Thymometry to look at the baseline QoL for a urban regeneration project called “One Norbiton” 28 random adults in the area employing the question

How happy or unhappy are you, in general, about living in Norbiton?

Finally we have used a truncated scale omitting the zero face in our current [App](#) (See **Fig 1a**) for a self-help service for addiction.

Thymometry uses so far

In summary Thymometry has been used with a wide range of questions on members of the general public, patients of all ages consulting GPs and on patients’ family members and carers. Studies have included population surveys, Comparative trials of Hay fever treatments, Comparative studies of antibiotics for bronchitis, Validation studies against Euroqol Studies on Depressed Patients Specific intervention studies to support carers and finally in a on-line free App designed to help those with harmful habits. (See: i-bet-me.com)

Results

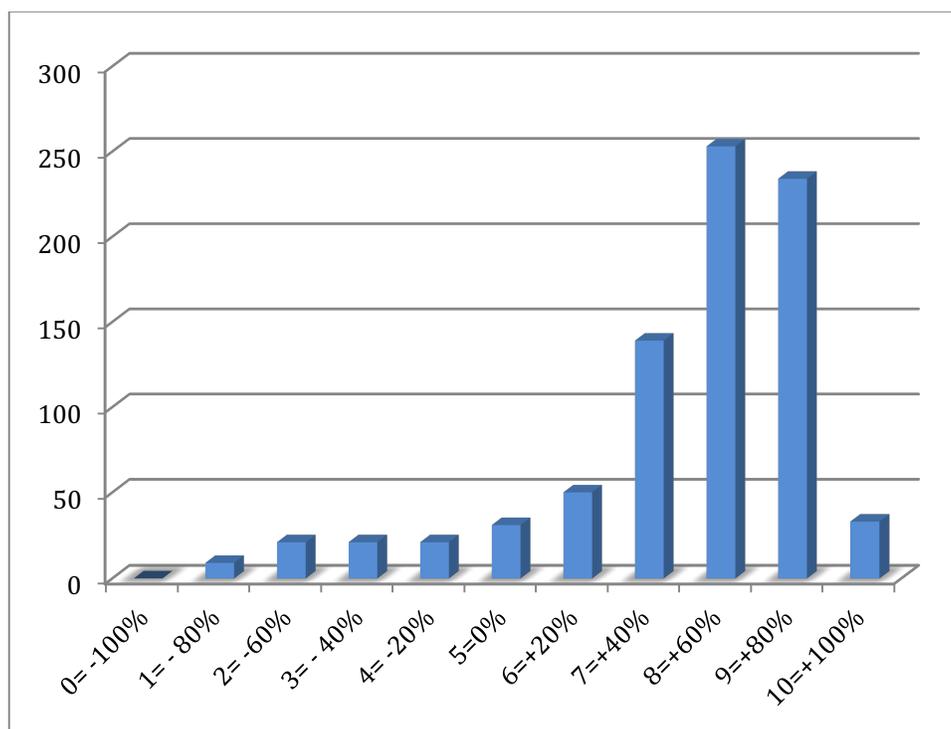
Tables, figures and commentary

Fig 2

Agenda 21 on improving Quality of Life in Kingston May-Aug 2000

Distribution of Face Thymometry

Agenda 21 on Quality of Life in Kingston May-Aug 2000



This is a population survey done on 804 random citizens in Kingston Upon Thames U.K. (48/52 Male/Female, Age distribution: <18yrs 7.5%, 18-24 2.9%, 25-40 24.9%, 41-60 40.5%, >60 24.1%) The Question asked was: "Please give us your opinion about the Quality of Life in Kingston Where +100% = as happy as possible)". Most of this population was at least +60% Happy.

The Question asked: "Please give us your opinion about the Quality of Life in Kingston (Where 100% = as happy as possible)".

All subjects studied appeared to understand the meaning of the Thymometry scale and how to use it. We found that it was both simple and brief enough to be applied in routine clinical care and its commonsensical and trans-cultural are an advantage.

Thymometry was used in Kingston's contribution to the "Agenda 21 survey" in 1999 (this was an international UN inspired project). It recruited adults in this fairly affluent area to measure what influenced their quality of life see (Fig 2) above. The faces scale was the least omitted data point (e.g. Age was omitted three times as often) The majority of this population rated themselves as Happy on the Thymometry Scale with a mode score of 8 (60%) and range 6 (20%) to (9.5) 90%.

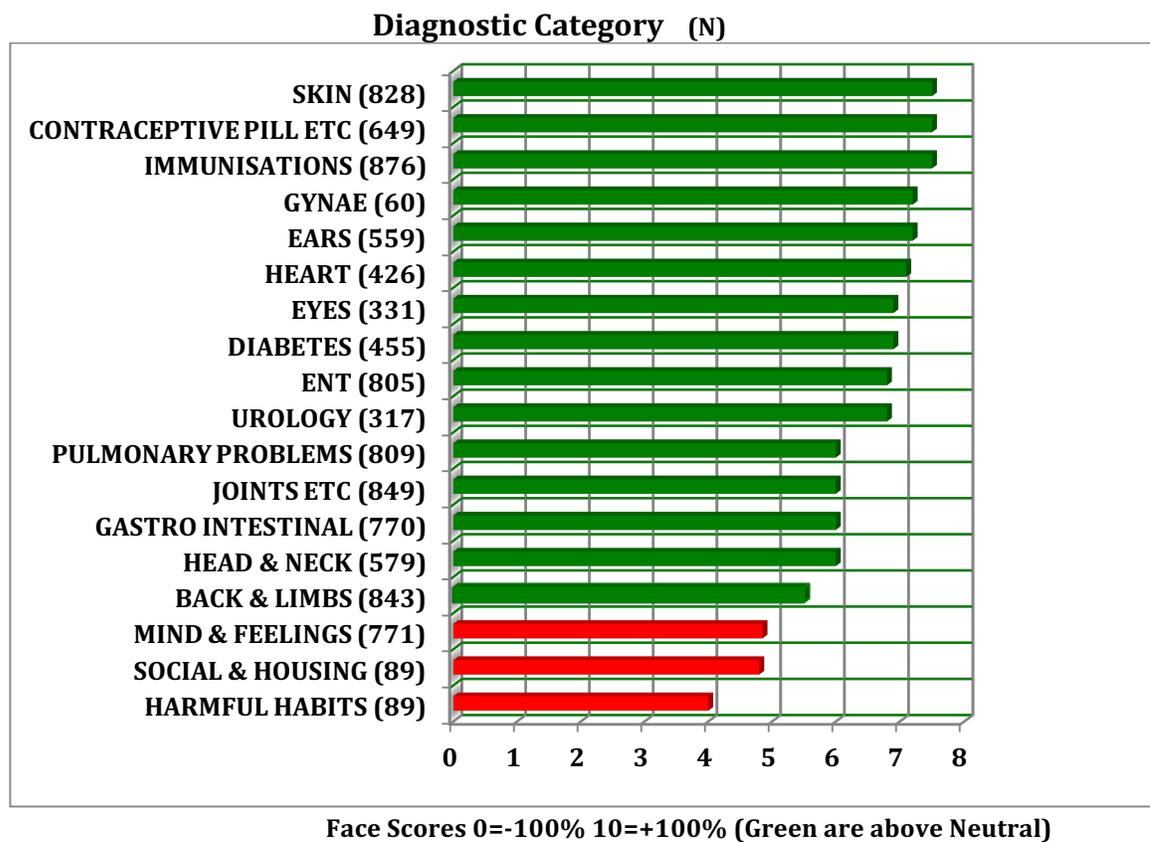
In early, 1995, touch-screen surveys of **GP Consulters**, Males recorded themselves as being slightly happier than Females. Also the younger (0-30yrs) and the older (60+) age groups recorded higher happiness scores than those of middle age. These interesting observations have been replicated by more recent studies using more elaborate measures. Viz. The Gross National Happiness Index (using 33 different indicators). Our study was a further demonstration of this U-shaped happiness distribution.^{14, 17}

Surveys of 11,230 Consultations

Patients consulting their General Practitioners for any reason completed a brief questionnaire on the front of a mark-sense form on arrival and at subsequent visits to their surgery. GPs gave no prior guidance on how to complete the forms so the data consisted of only the patient's views. The Doctor or practice nurse completed the back of the form recording Diagnostic group and Treatment. See **Fig. 3**.

Follow up was not formalized but occurred on return for routine care (when the patients previous scores were *not* made available to them).

Fig 3. Face Scores by Primary Care Diagnoses



Construct Validity:

Not one of the subjects in our studies reported any difficulties in understanding what the faces meant. The Thymometry scale was usually completed in less than 10 seconds and it's within-subject repeatability, after a 3-minute interval, averaged 99.7 %. Thymometry scores discriminated between this large group of GP patients in a logical and expected way; those attending for harmful habits recorded an average happiness score of only (30%) whereas in those attending for immunizations prior to going on holiday the average was 7 (70%). See **Table 1**.

Biological Validity:

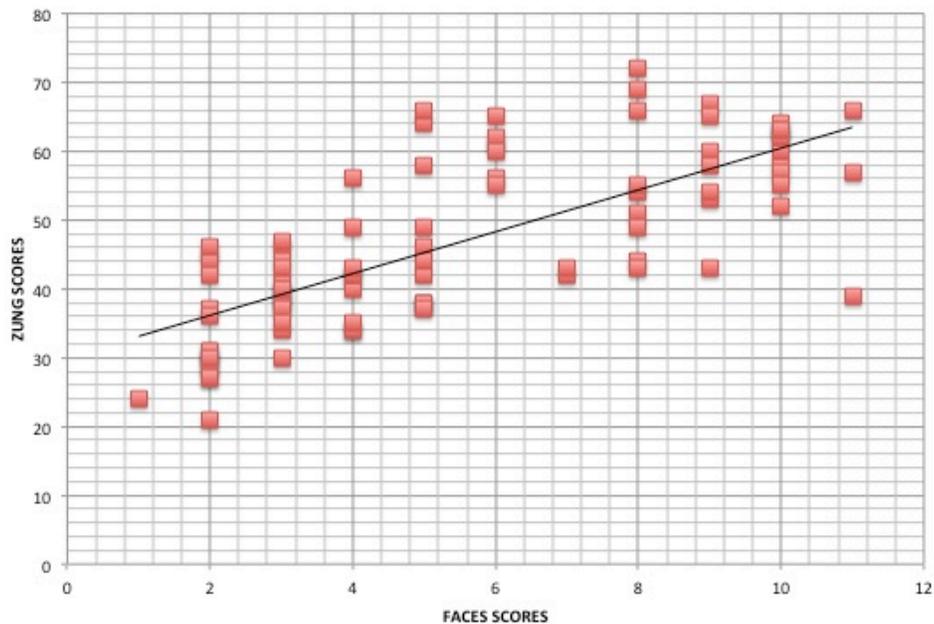
In comparative studies of Hay fever treatments, we found that changes in local pollen counts were reflected appropriately by changes in the analogue line scoring that developed into Thymometry.¹³

Convergent Validity:

This was shown for Depression where Zung scores correlated very well with Thymometry **Fig 4. below**. The change in Thymometry scores in depression at two weeks and at four weeks showed a consistent gradient across the spectrum of clinical change and this was supported by clinical observation. Additional support for Thymometry mirroring symptoms was shown in a study of painful conditions where McGill pain scores appropriately correlated with Thymometry, though correlation here was not as good as for depression. See **Table 1**

Fig. 4

Faces correlate well with Zung Depression scores



Zung scores in 84 patients in a Depression study in 1998 correlated significantly with Zung scores $r_s = 0.7716$ $p < 0.00001$

Discriminant validity:

Testing whether concepts or measurements that are supposed to be unrelated are, in fact, unrelated has not yet been formally checked for Thymometry.

Sensitivity to Change:

This is tested by appropriate responsiveness to situations. It was shown to occur in Depression studies, comparative trials of Hay Fever¹³ and in Antibiotic studies where daily improvements in clinical condition were reflected by Thymometry scores. In our 1998 comparative trials of Antidepressant therapy involving 162 patients being randomized to receive either; Folic Acid (as a control), "Edronax", "Zispin", "Prozac", "Fluanxol", "Effexor", "Dutonin" or Counseling **Table 1**. The average starting Thymometry scores ranged from 3 (30%) to 5 (50%). The outcomes showed that most patients improved over three months with average scores rising to a range of 5 (50%) to 6 (60%), which accorded with their observed improved clinical status.

Concordance with Gold Standard

When used to measure Quality of Life, Thymometry correlated highly significantly with the briefest currently used gold standard EuroQol 5D ($r_s=0.7423$ $p=0.00005$) See **Table 1 below**

Table 1.**Table 1 Some other studies using Face Thymometry**

Study Topic	Comparator	Population	Result	Reference
1. Pain	McGill Pain	14 patients with painful conditions	$r_s = 0.392$ $p < 0.08$	No prior publicatio
2. Stress	Counseling	24 relatives of substance abusers	Significant and self-evident result using Thymometry	No prior publicatio
3. Hay Fever	Pollen Count	114 Hay fever Sufferers	Av. daily pollen count showed linear regression with patient diary scores	Reference (13)
4. Quality of Life	EuroQol 5D	50 GP patients	$r_s=0.7423$ $p < 0.00005$	No prior publicatio

Apart from in the very small study on painful conditions, Face Thymometry scores correlated well with other symptomatic measures

Unlike analogue line systems, which rely solely on intellectually conceptualization and the attribution of the meaning of the verbal captions to the length of the line, Thymometry adds a visual reference to mirror the subject's feelings.

Its eleven-point scale was found to be more discriminatory than a binary or three-point scale. On the other hand, it is uncertain whether increasing the number of points on such a faces scale would be even more advantageous. However, when a 21-point scale was placed under the faces it did not add any measurable discriminatory power. Altering size of the smiles might help e.g. by creating a 100-point scale. However very small differences in smile are difficult to distinguish visually.

Importance:

Significance and the likelihood of observations being real are often calculated, however "importance" is too often ignored. This is essentially a subjective view on what degree of change matters to the individual. This is critical when it comes to commissioning by outcome. Using our eleven-point faces scale, we asked 53 consecutive patients (Males 21, Females 32) "What is the smallest change in this faces score that you would consider important? E.g. indicate that you were unhappy to continue with your present treatment. The mode was "2 faces" the next highest was "1 face". Clearly the degree of freedom to move in either direction was altered as the extremities of the scale were reached. Further work is planned on this aspect.

Responsiveness to clinical change in Antibiotic Studies

Thymometry seems to reflect a limited but adequate measure of subjective feelings associated with clinical change over time. In unpublished comparison studies of the symptom response of respiratory infections to five different Antibiotics (Amoxicillin, Amoxil, Augmentin, Distachlor and Erythromycin) similar regular improvement in daily Thymometry scores was observed in all, matching the observed clinical recovery.

Responsiveness to clinical change in Addiction Studies

Changes were observed over months in studies treating severe class A addicts with a contingency management regime; the mode for their initial Faces Score was low at 4. This was in accord with their distressed clinical state at presentation and only 29% (5/17) scored more than 0. N.B. This was in marked contrast with concurrent Norbiton community studies where the mode score was 6 and 83% (29/36) scored more than 0. The contingency management regime employed awarded the patients vouchers (CareCreds) if they took better care of themselves and or their friends and families. After nine months earning of [CareCreds](#), 62.5% (15/24) were scoring more than 0, matching their unexpected and encouraging clinical improvement.

Mismatched Scores

Of additional interest has been the observation that, particularly in our Depression and Addiction studies, a few individuals score themselves as extremely happy or extremely unhappy on the Faces scale despite this not being supported by our general clinical assessments. When these cases were examined more closely many were often found to have personality difficulties. So rather than view this as a methodological weakness in the faces scale we realized that it might be revealing something of clinical use. E.g. Patients who score themselves as 100% happy despite being clinically depressed might be suffering from masked depression and require pharmaceutical intervention. While when the situation is reversed and patients record themselves as 100% unhappy yet have no evidence of depression, this might indicate personality disorder where drug treatment is best avoided.

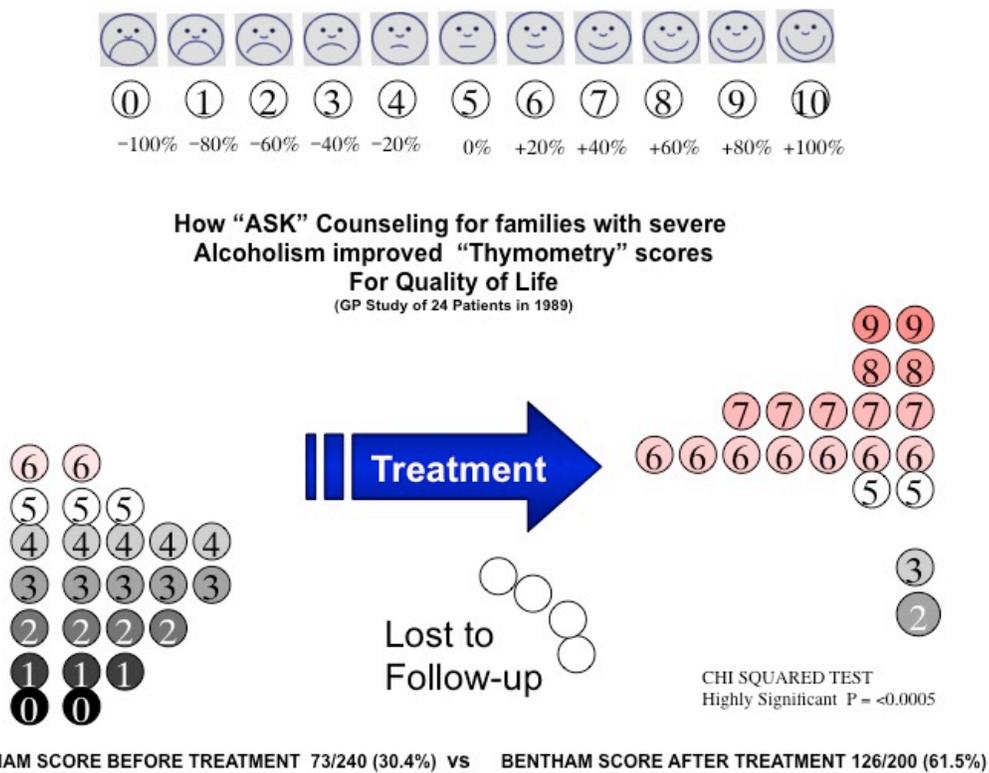
"Bentham Scores" and statistical testing with Thymometry

Because of its subjective nature, Thymometry has important limitations as a metric. It is not a ratio scale and averaging is only of limited descriptive value and it is inappropriate to use T-test analyses.

It may however be legitimately used to compare populations and the larger the group the better.

We have developed the concept of calculating a “Bentham score” for populations as one way of doing this. A “Bentham score” is the sum of every individual’s happiness score taken as a proportion of a notional “perfect population score” in which every individual scores a maximum on the Thymometry scale i.e. exhibits the “greatest good for the greatest number of people.”¹⁵ Then a simple non-parametric Chi-squared test can legitimately be used to estimate significance e.g. between the Bentham scores of population samples or between pre and post intervention scores in the same population. See Fig 5 below.

Fig. 5
The Evaluation of Counseling using Face Thymometry



The doubling of the “Bentham” scores in the relatives of severe alcoholics who had received counseling persuaded Kingston Health Authority to commission this service.
The low initial Quality of life in these relatives complemented the finding in Fig 3 that consultants with “harmful habits” score the lowest Quality of Life of all patients.

Discussion

It was Peck who first coined the term “Thymometry” for measuring pain¹⁶, however this paper uses this word more generically (accepting its etymology as “the measurement of feelings”).

Nearly all the studies reported here were done in the community, mostly in large populations who

were consulting their general practitioners. They have covered quite diverse topics, including Quality of Life in populations, Hay Fever, Pain, Depression, Respiratory infection, Counseling, Stress, Drug abuse and the Usefulness of Treatments. For the most part they are examples of *Clinical Epidemiology* where the groups under investigation were composed of *individuals* known to the investigator. This has meant that the conclusions on whether the outcomes suggested by Thymometry were reasonable could be helpfully checked against direct clinical knowledge. Although the pace of life has delayed their earlier publication, this has had the advantage of permitting a deeper reflection on what might be the value of using such an instrument.

Like all such scales, Thymometry has been found to have both pros and cons. Most diseases, either immediately or eventually, generate a degree of unpleasant symptoms relevant to their severity. The use of diagrammatic facial expressions to self-grade severity and create a baseline and post-intervention scores seems an essentially simple concept. However, whenever a person chooses what "Face" to record, they are making a synthesis of a wide range of factors. This synthesis might not always be appropriate e.g. when there are serious conditions, such as hypertension and malignancy that may be initially symptomless.

Nevertheless, judged by the studies reported here, the Face Thymometer is a generally reliable measure and has Construct, Convergent and Biological validity. We have also shown it to be sensitive to short and long-term clinical change and to correlate well with the gold standard of Euroqol 5D as a measure of Quality of Life. In terms of appending a legend to the scale to measure Quality of Life the social enquiry "How are you today?" is preferred. A shift of one to two faces was considered "important" by patients in one of our studies, supporting our decision to create no more than an 11-point scale.

However we have also found that sometimes caution is required when interpreting the meaning of the faces scale, particularly in subjects with personality difficulties. Also, because of its very nature, it is statistically illegitimate to use T-tests to compare test averages of Thymometry data; instead the concept of comparing populations non-parametrically, by calculating "Bentham scores" is advised.

There is growing evidence that it would be invaluable to share existing databases from both clinical, social and voluntary services particularly to better understand complex individuals who may be blocking beds in hospitals or causing "heart-sink" in the community. Having a single metric like Thymometry that can be easily incorporated in the IT systems of all the caring agencies could greatly stimulate collaborative care and the interconnection of information systems.

Changes related to a whole variety of interventions or combinations of interventions could then be analyzed. This could complement RCTs or substitute for them when they cannot be done due to high costs or the ethical problems of giving sick people placebos etc. The development of such a unified system could enable ongoing review of new intervention policies such as switching care from Hospital to the Community.

In conclusion, although there are many more detailed instruments available to measure disease-specific outcomes¹⁸, Face Thymometry despite its simplicity seems to be a valid *generic* tool. It is brief, transcultural and understandable even by the illiterate. It has been successfully used in unsupervised touch-screen auto-receptionists to record wellbeing before and after interventions.

It can be argued that outcome-based commissioning might be best established when routine objective measurements of Mortality, Morbidity and Service usage data are augmented by the routine collection of subjective measures such as face Thymometry scores. However quantifying quality will always be a hazardous endeavor. As Bernard Shaw once remarked "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same." However having a simple, tried and tested metric such as Face Thymometry that can continuously picture whether the greatest good is being delivered to the greatest number of people in their *own* opinion, might be a helpful shared target, for most of our public services to aim at.

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Conflicts of interest: None.

Limitations on use: Thymometry has copyright owned by TORCHE C. C. Ltd. It is freely available to non-profit making agencies and pro bono researchers however notification of use and sharing of non-confidential data would be appreciated.
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