

Referral rates to Psychiatry of Later Life services during the Covid-19 pandemic, a 12-month mirror study.

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Background: The rapid spread of Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11th 2020. The first case of Covid-19 was documented in the Republic of Ireland on February 27th 2020. Since this time, a host of measures have been implemented including restriction of travel and social distancing measures (Citizens Information, 2021). It has been widely feared that Covid-19 will trigger a global “tsunami” of mental health difficulties (Kavukcu, Akdeniz, 2020). A recent Danish study, however, has demonstrated a reduction in referral rates (Kølbæk et. Al, 2020).

We wished to explore the real-world impact of Covid-19 and associated social restrictions on referral rates to secondary care psychiatric services in Ireland. We studied the number of referrals received by the Psychiatry of Later Life, Galway West team. Referrals came from primary care physicians (GP’s), emergency department (ED) attendance or referrals from the local University Hospital via consultations which required team follow-up.

Aims: To assess for the impact of Covid-19 on secondary care psychiatry referrals by assessing the following:

- 1) The number of referrals from GPs and the hospital service in UHG made to adult and older age psychiatry on a month-month basis
- 2) The nature of the referral reason (anxiety/mood/cognitive difficulty/psychosis)
- 3) Whether or not in the post-lockdown phase, referrals specifically mention/allude to Covid-19

Methods: Using a mirror study format, data was collected for six months prior to and post March 2020; Ireland’s first “lockdown”. Thirteen months of data was collected in total, assessing referral letters from primary care, ED and consultation requests requiring follow-up.

Results: Referrals and their respective sources are broken down on a monthly basis in figure 1.

Results were pooled as being “pre lockdown” from September 2019- February 2020 and “post lockdown” from April 2020- September 2020. Unfortunately 20.5% of referrals were unavailable to be reviewed during the study period despite all efforts to procure them; many of these were for discharged patients whose files were in storage.

181 referrals were received in the pre lockdown period vs 180 in the post lockdown period. An initial drop in referrals was noted following lockdown in April 2020, with a 50% reduction of referrals compared to February 2020. There were no significant differences in referral source between periods ($\chi^2= 3.99, p=0.262$).

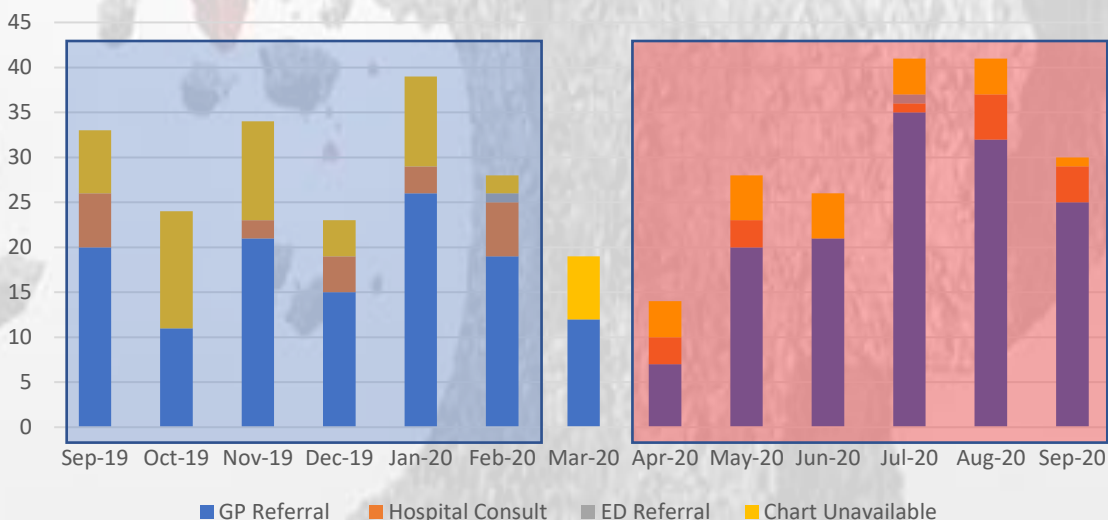
Though more referrals were received in the post-lockdown period for anxiety and cognitive related difficulties, these differences in referral reason were not significant ($\chi^2=9.28, p=0.098$). There was no significant difference between periods for referrals being new or re-referrals ($\chi^2=1.14, \text{Fishers' Exact } p=0.323$).

34/156 referrals (21.8%) in the post-lockdown period mentioned or strongly alluded to Covid-19. 62% of these were for mood/anxiety, 32% for cognitive related difficulties.

Conclusion: Our study demonstrates an initial decrease in referral rates following lockdown with a gradual increase of referral following national easing of restrictions. Overall, no significant differences were noted between time periods, suggesting a lack of actual increased demands on services. The authors suggest extending this study for 6 months further to capture potential trends in response to the stresses of the ongoing pandemic that may not be reflected in this time period.

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval was granted by the Galway Clinical Research Ethics Committee.

Figure 1: Galway West POLL Referrals Pre and Post March 2020



References:

Citizens Information- Public health measures for COVID-19 (https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/covid19/public_health_measures_for_covid19.html). Accessed 6 January 2021

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Kølbæk, P., Nørremark, B. and Østergaard, S.D., 2020. Forty percent reduction in referrals to psychiatric services during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, p.1.