

An audit of referrals to North Kerry CAMHS pre and post Covid 19 restrictions

Makayla Donovan (1) Dr S. Cleary (2)

1. Final year medical student, University College Cork. 2. Senior registrar University Hospital Kerry

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented lockdown restrictions in Ireland beginning 27th March 2020. Undoubtedly the resulting school closures, social distancing, sports cessations, travel restrictions and many other factors impacted on the mental health of children and adolescents across the country with research showing an initial decline in referrals to CAMHS in 2020 there has been an unprecedented increase from September 2020. There is also emerging evidence of a large rise in eating disorder presentations with an increase in hospitalisations and a decrease in the median BMI of those admitted suggesting these patients are possibly more medically compromised at time of admission. This increase in demands on CAMHS teams has occurred without the provision of additional resources to meet the demand and at a time when mental health has been allocated less than 6% of the health budget.

Methodology

I completed a retrospective review of all referrals to the North Kerry CAMHS team between January 2020- March 2020 and those received between January 2021- March 2021. Information relating to the referrals received during this time period was collected from the stored copies of the weekly MDT meeting discussion. All referrals received within the preceding week are discussed at this weekly meeting and relevant information such as patient identifiers, reason for referral as documented by referrer and source of referral are documented in these minutes. I recorded the data using an electronic audit tool. The data collected included the source of referral, presenting complaint according to referrer and the age and gender of the patient.

Aims

We aimed to evaluate if the trend of increasing referrals to CAMHS teams was also evident in referrals to the North Kerry CAMHS team. We looked to compare the referrals from a period of time pre-Covid 19 lockdown restrictions with the same time period one year later.

We also sought to identify any change in the patterns of referrals between these two time points

Results

There was a 43% increase in new referrals to North Kerry CAMHS from Jan-Mar between 2020 and 2021 from 65 to 93.

There was also notable differences in the reason for referral as documented by the referrer. Suicidal behaviour (categorised by deliberate self-harm with suicidal intent) saw a 250% increase in the 2021 time period vs 2020.

Referrals for disordered eating accounted for 0% of the 2020 new referrals and 5% of the 2021 new referrals. (Figure 2&3)

A greater proportion of those referred in 2021 were female with the female to male ratio shifting from 0.8:1 in 2020 to 1.3:1 in 2021. (figure 1.)

Referrals for purely low mood decreased in 2021 but there was an increased number of more complex mood referrals with more somatic symptoms mentioned in 2021 as well as an increased rate of referrals for anxiety.

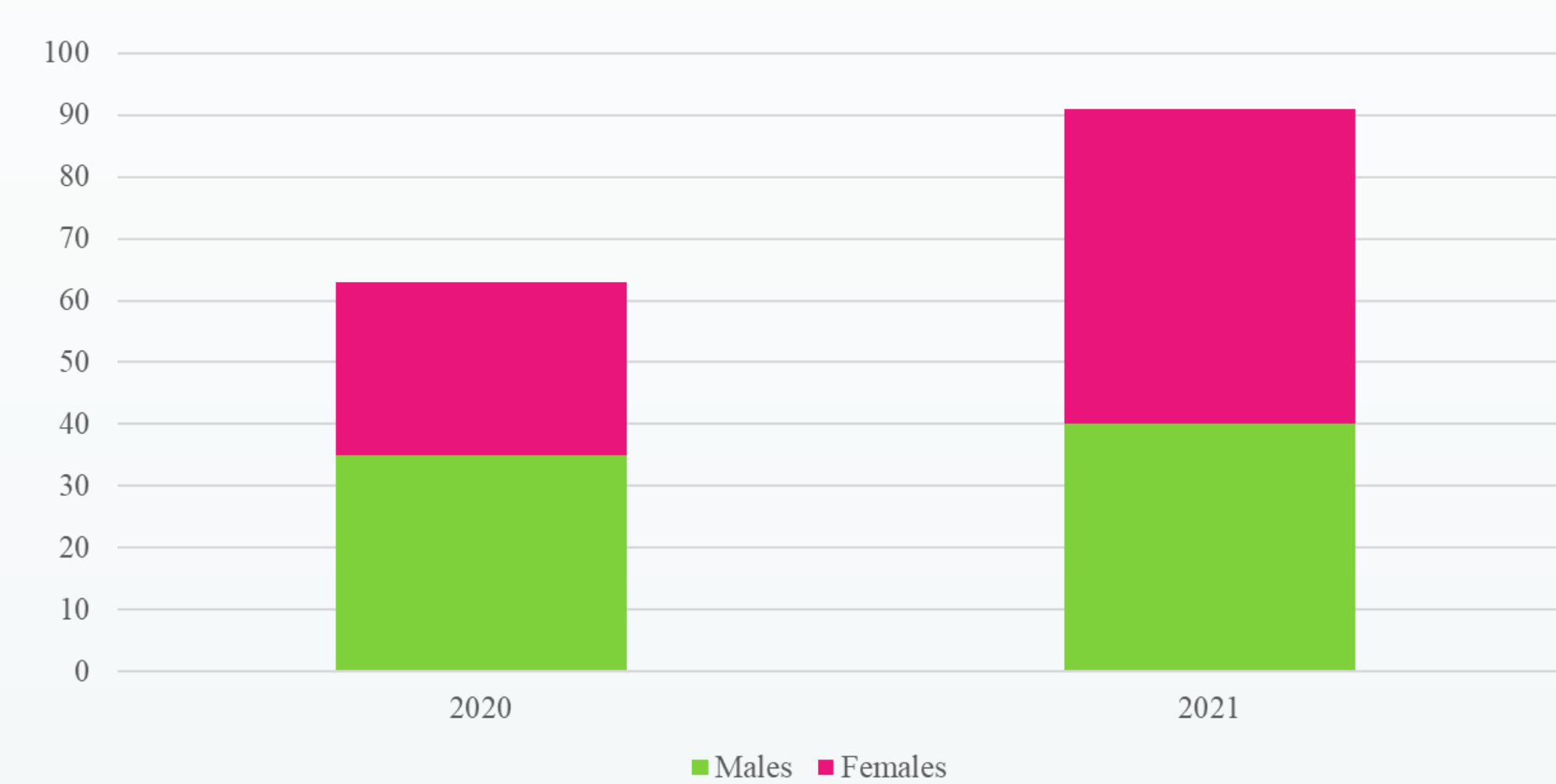


Figure 1.

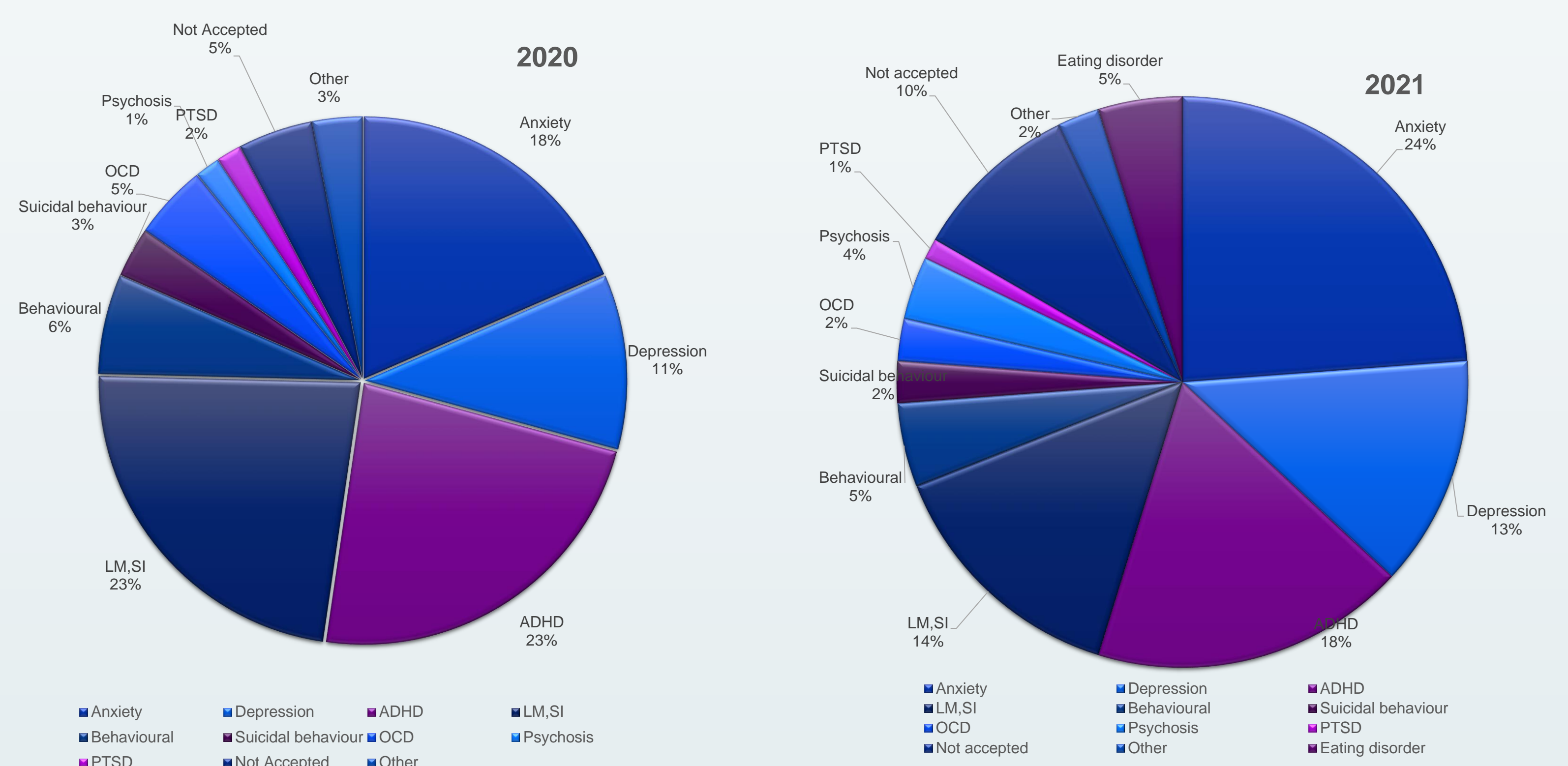


Figure 2.

Figure 3

Discussion

The findings in North Kerry CAMHS from Jan-Mar 2020 and 2021 are consistent with research on CAMHS referrals during the COVID 19 pandemic in Ireland to date.

Limitations for this audit include that the outcomes of assessments of these referrals were not reviewed and a relatively short time from. As well as this details were taken from the MDT meeting minutes alone and not the original referral letter therefore whether or not pandemic related buzzwords such as “lockdown” “covid” “social distancing” etc were mentioned in the referrals could not be accurately assessed.

Further research looking at the impact of this increased demand on resources has to an already overstretched service and treatment outcomes would likely identify a need for greater investment in CAMHS nationwide and in particular eating disorder services.

Acknowledgements and references

Consent obtained for clinical audit from clinical director Dr Young

McNicholas F, Kelleher I, Hedderman E, Lynch F, Healy E, Thornton T, Barry E, Kelly L, McDonald J, Holmes K, Kavanagh G, Migone M. Referral patterns for specialist child and adolescent mental health services in the Republic of Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic compared with 2019 and 2018. *BJPsych Open*. 2021 May 3;7(3):e91. doi: 10.1192/bjo.2021.48. PMID: 33938419; PMCID: PMC8111180.
Barrett, E. & Richardson, S. (2021) Invited Editorial: Eating Disorders During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ireland, *Irish Medical Journal*
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40139483.html>