

Background

Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the WHO on March 11th 2020. It was widely feared that this would trigger a global "tsunami" of mental health difficulties (Kavukcu, Akdeniz, 2020). We wished to explore the real-world impact of Covid-19 and associated social restrictions on referral rates to secondary care psychiatric services. We studied referrals for three Psychiatric teams (CAMHS, General Adult and Psychiatry of Later Life (POLL)) in the West of Ireland.

Aims

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

- 1) Number of referrals from GPs and the hospital service in UHG made to CAMHS, adult and POLL.
- 2) Referral reasons (pathology of concern)
- 3) Whether or not 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 referrals from primary care, Emergency Department and hospital consultations requiring follow-up.

Results

A total of 797 referrals were received across the three clinical teams (CAMHS n=207, GAP n=210, POLL n=380). Unfortunately, there was incomplete data for 140 patients (17.5%) as these charts were not available during the study period or the patient had been discharged.

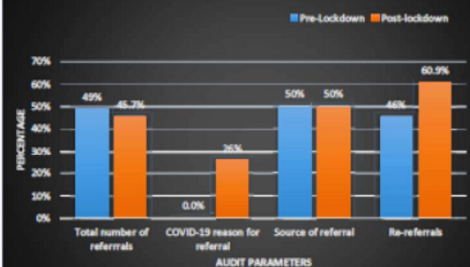
391 referrals (49.1%) were received in the "pre lockdown" period of September 2019- February 2020 compared to 364 referrals (45.7%) in the "post lockdown" period of April 2020- September 2020. Interestingly there was an initial reduction of referral in April 2020 immediately after Ireland's first "lockdown", with just 29 referrals across all three services compared to 83 referrals in January 2020.

There were no significant differences in source of referral pre and post lockdown, ($\chi^2 = 1.097$, $p=0.785$). There were some changes noted in referral reason, ($\chi^2 = 15.358$, $p=0.027$) with a small reduction in referrals for psychosis and addiction issues post lockdown.

There was a proportional increase in re-referrals post-lockdown compared to pre-lockdown ($\chi^2 = 4.651$, $p=0.031$).

25.7% of referrals mentioned or directly alluded to Covid being a factor leading to the referral post lockdown.

Data Analysis



Conclusion

This study demonstrates a concerning finding of an early reduction in referral rates post lockdown, which may reflect an apprehension to utilise services during this time or reduced access to primary care. Our findings demonstrate a generally stable referral rate to secondary care services, evidence against the initial concerns of a major increase in demand for mental health services due to Covid-19.

Declaration

This research received no sponsorship or funding.

Ethical approval was received from the Galway clinical research ethics committee on 16th February 2021.

Part of the dataset old age (POLL) has previously been presented at the Irish college Spring conference 2021 but this is the complete dataset of the study with a comparison of 3 services (CAMHS, ADULT and POLL)