

Emergency Department Presentations to the Mental Health Services at Sligo University Hospital during the COVID pandemic

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Introduction

In March 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 a pandemic and Ireland went into its first lockdown. The ensuing 18 months have had an impact both on the general population's mental health and their access to services. The Mental Health Liaison team at Sligo University Hospital operate 8am to 8pm, 7 days a week, with out of hours covered by the on call Psychiatry NCHD. The service has seen an increase in referrals, many of whom are already known to Community Mental Health teams.

Objectives

1. To review the numbers and trend of mental health presentations to the Emergency Department (ED) at Sligo University Hospital over the past three years, including the patterns of presentations around the times of covid 19 restrictions.
2. To compare mental health presentations to the ED during a one year period directly before the Covid 19 pandemic to a one year period during the pandemic.

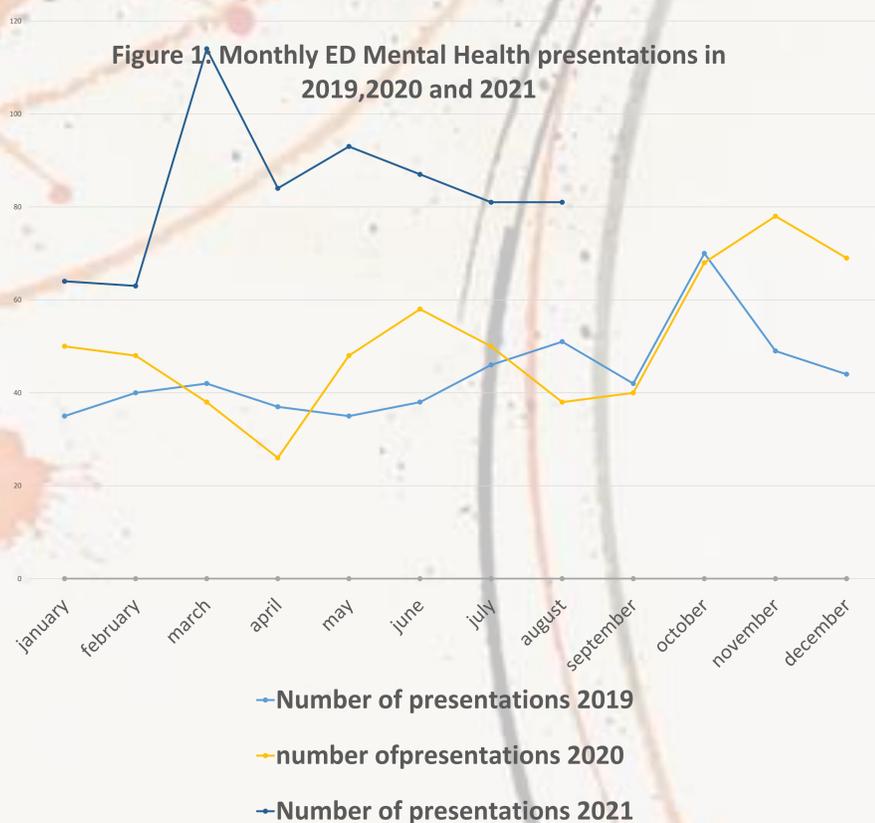
Methodology

The Liaison Mental Health Service at Sligo University Hospital gathers data relating to numbers and types of presentation to the service. Data was taken from a pre-existing database of psychiatric presentations to the emergency department at Sligo University Hospital including patient demographics, nature of presenting complaint, time period in which they presented and whether they were previously linked in with a community mental health team in the preceding six months. We also looked at the pattern of ED mental health presentations from March 2019 to August 2021.

In order to compare psychiatric presentations pre and during covid, data was broken down into two groups: the twelve months immediately preceding March 2020 and the twelve months from March 2020. Categorical data were analysed using the Chi squared test for homogeneity in SPSS.

Results

A total of 529 patients presented to the ED with mental health complaints in 2019, 611 in 2020 and 667 in the period of Jan-Aug 2021. This represented 1.3% of total ED attendances in 2019, 1.7% in 2020 and 2.2% in Jan-Aug 2021.



Comparing the pre-covid and covid groups, there were 631 presentations during the one year of covid 19 period studied compared to 552 in the preceding twelve months (14% increase). Deliberate self-harm was the most common presentation in both groups as well as more females than males. There was a significantly greater proportion of presentations of psychosis during the pandemic period ($p < .014$) and for medication review ($p = .03$) and significantly less presenting with addiction ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1: A comparison of mental health presentations to the ED over a one year period prior to and during the covid 19 pandemic.

	Pre Covid 19 (March 2019-20)	During Covid 1 (March 2021-22)	P value
Gender (Male/female)	280/282	297/343	.19
SI/DSH	336 (61%)	357(56%)	.13
Depression/Anxiety	69 (12.5%)	100 (16%)	.10
Addictions	70 (13%)	36 (6%)	.00
Psychosis	22 (4%)	46 (7.3%)	.01
aggression/agitation	8 (1.5%)	14 (2%)	.33
Medication rv/Advice	6 (1%)	18 (3%)	.03
Mania	2 (0.5%)	6 (1%)	.23
Others	39 (7%)	54 ((8.5%)	.34
Total	562	640	

SI: Suicidal Ideation, DSH: Deliberate Self-Harm, Medication r/v: Medication review.

Conclusions

The Covid 19 pandemic led to increased mental health presentations to the emergency department, with the proportion of patients presenting with mental health issues increasing from 1.3% in 2019 to 2.2% in 2021. Of those presenting with mental health issues, a significantly greater proportion presented with psychosis and for medication review during the pandemic than prior to its outbreak. An unexpected finding was that a significantly lesser proportion of patients presented with addiction during the pandemic.

Recommendations

- This findings have important implications in terms of how community mental health services manage their workload going forward in order to provide for the mental health needs that are currently evident. In particular, the increase in mental health presentations to ED overall and the increase in presentations of patients with acute psychosis is concerning.
- It is imperative that mental health services are adequately resourced and supported to deal with these increases as it will have an impact on patient care. Research in this area needs to continue, as the after effects of this pandemic on mental health are likely to be ongoing into future.
- Therefore, we would urge continued support for the development of an environment within the Emergency Dept that lends itself to providing the dignity and psychological safety needed for our patients when we are seeing them at their most vulnerable.

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