

Characteristics of young people referred into North Galway CAMHS during the first year of the Covid Pandemic (March 2020-April 2021)

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Background: There has been much interest internationally on the effect of Covid and resultant public health measures on the mental health of young people. Recent research has shown changes in character and acuity of presentation to CAMHS both nationally and internationally during the Covid pandemic (1,2,3).

North Galway CAMHS is a community mental health service for young people up to 18 years of age, covering a mixed urban and rural population. Referrals to North Galway CAMHS typically originate from the GP, the Emergency Department or other hospital department or from certain primary care services.

Aim:

The aim of our study was to ascertain whether there has been any change in characteristics of those referred into North Galway CAMHS during the first year of the Covid pandemic when compared with the two preceding years.

Methods:

The proposed research was discussed with the Ethics Department of University Hospital Galway.

We conducted a retrospective review of all referrals (both new referrals and re-referrals) sent into North Galway CAMHS during the first year of the Covid pandemic and compared the characteristics of accepted referrals under categories of age, sex, source of referral and presenting difficulty. We were seeking to ascertain if our catchment area was seeing similar trends around referrals to those noted in recent research.

Statistical analysis was done using Microsoft Excel

Results:

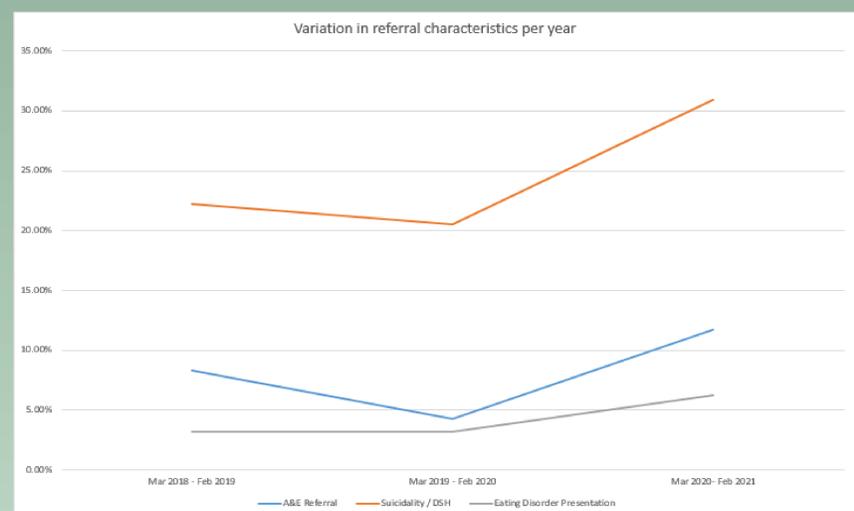
There were 221 total referrals to North Galway CAMHS during the time period 01-Mar-2020 to 01-Mar-2021 this compares with 250 referrals between March 2019-March 2020 and 276 referrals between March 2018-March 2019.

During the first Covid year 48% of accepted referrals were male and 68% of accepted referrals were over 13 years of age.

During the first Covid year there were significantly more of the accepted referrals originating from the Emergency Department than during the other two years (11.7% of referrals versus 4.3% and 8.3% respectively).

There were many more presentations in which the referral agent was concerned about self-harming or suicidal behaviours (30.86% Vs 20.5% and 22.2% respectively).

An increase was also noticed in the number of patients being referred with a possible eating disorder (6.2% Vs 3.2% and 3.2% respectively)



Conclusions:

The numbers of referrals into North Galway CAMHS decreased in the first Covid year, we hypothesize that this was perhaps as a consequence of reluctance to attend GP for non-urgent concerns during lockdown.

This is also reflected in the increased proportion of referrals received from Emergency Departments when compared to previous years.

Of note is the increased rate of urgent presentations (eating disorder referrals and referrals where there are concerns around self-harm and suicidality). Should that trend continue when referral numbers stabilise it would put considerable increased pressure on an already busy service in order to meet the needs of a population presenting with more acute needs.

References:

- 1) McDonnell T et al "Increased Mental Health Presentation by children aged 5-15 at Emergency Departments during the first 12 months of COVID-19". Irish Medical Journal 2021 May;114 (5): 356
- 2) McNicholas F et al 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, 7, (3) e91
- 3) Chu Han Huang H, Ougrin D Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child and adolescent mental health services. BJPsych Open (2021) 7, e145,1-3