

One year of psychiatric presentations to a hospital emergency department during COVID-19

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Introduction

There is widespread recognition of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on those with mental illness. It is crucial to examine how this elevated psychological burden manifests in emergency psychiatric presentations so that mitigating steps can be taken to manage this on a local and national level and to advocate for appropriate service funding and staffing within mental health services.

This study describes one full year of psychiatric presentations to a large academic hospital's emergency department (ED) from the arrival of COVID-19 in the Republic of Ireland and compares this to the preceding 2 years.

Methods

This study was undertaken in Beaumont Hospital Emergency Department. Beaumont Hospital (BH) is a large academic hospital in the north of Dublin City, Ireland, with 820 beds, serving the adult population aged 16 years and older.

Anonymised clinical data on psychiatric presentations to the ED were collected for the 52-week period from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and compared with corresponding one year periods in 2019 and 2018.

Results

There was a significant reduction in total presentations to the ED during the COVID-19 period: 995 per week (± 123.4) vs 1115.2 (± 52.3) pre-COVID.

Figure 1. Distributions of psychiatric presentations by age.

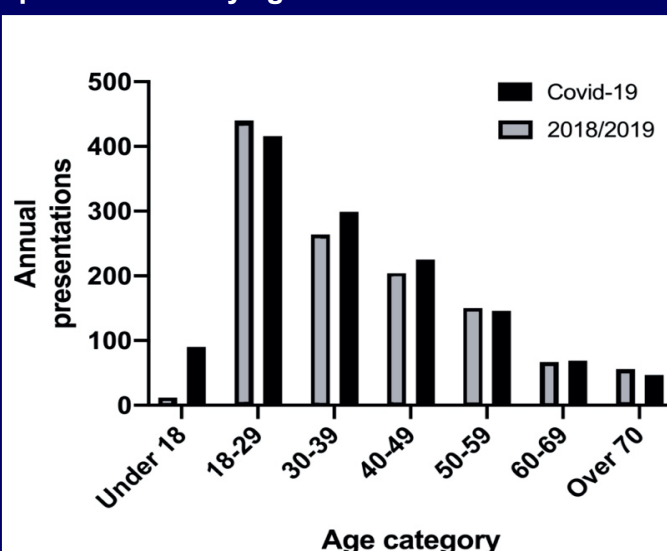
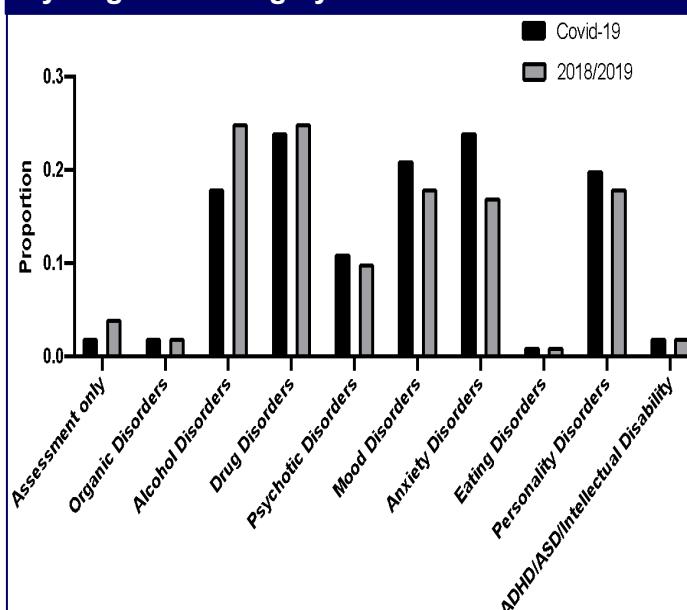


Figure 2. Distribution of psychiatric presentations by diagnostic category.



There was an increase in the rate of psychiatric presentations during COVID-19 24.9 (± 6) vs 22.9 (± 4.8).

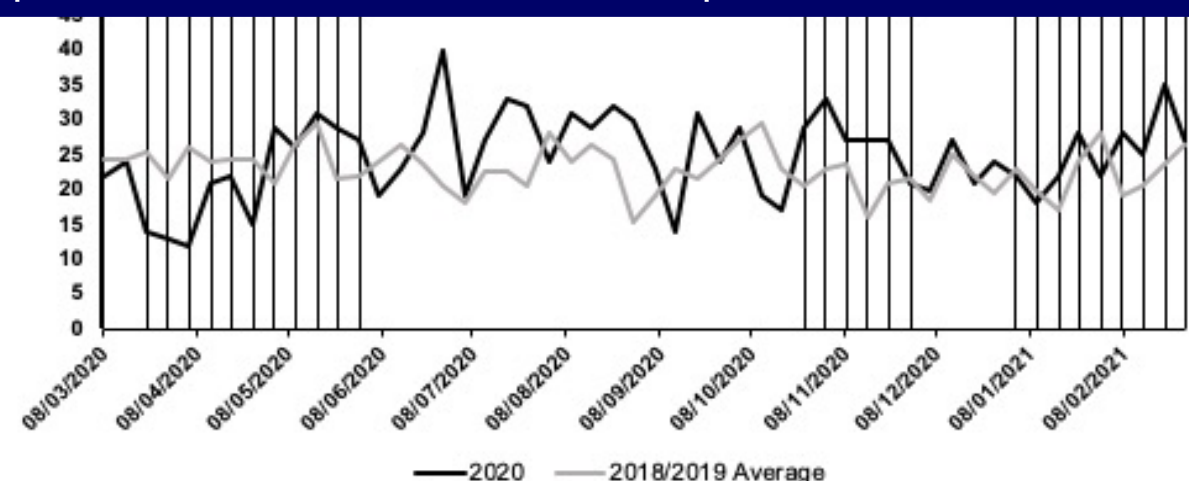
There was a dramatic increase of patients below the age of 18 presenting with emergency mental health needs.

There was a significant proportional increase in presentations of anxiety disorders during the COVID-19 period and a decrease of alcohol-related disorders.

There was a significantly increased proportion of presentations out of hours (i.e. outside Monday to Friday, 09:00 a.m. to 05:00 p.m.) during the COVID-19 period.

There was an increase in rates of self-harm and suicidal ideation but these did not reach statistical significance.

Figure 3. Weekly psychiatric presentations to ED 2020 vs 2019/2018. Vertical lines indicate periods severe societal restrictions i.e. "lockdown" periods.



Conclusions

Psychiatric presentations increased during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in contrast to a decrease in presentations for other medical specialties, with this increase being driven by out-of-hours presentations. The fourfold increase in presentations of young people below the age of 18 years with mental health difficulties suggests a disproportionate burden of psychological strain placed on this group during the pandemic.