

The Prevalence of Autism among Adults admitted to Acute Mental Health Wards: A Multi-Site Cross-Sectional Pilot Study

Sam Tromans (ST6 in Intellectual Disability Psychiatry¹ & Academic Clinical Lecturer²), Guiqing Yao², Reza Kiani^{1,2}, Regi Alexander^{3,4}, Mohammed Al-Uzri^{1,2}, Rohit Shankar^{5,6}, and Traolach Brugha^{1,2}

¹ Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust, ² University of Leicester, ³ Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, ⁴ University of Hertfordshire, ⁵ Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, ⁶ University of Exeter

Background

- Autism is present in approximately 1% of the general population within community settings.
 - Though it is significantly more prevalent in persons with intellectual disabilities.¹
- There has been relatively little research into the prevalence of autism within psychiatric inpatient settings.**
 - A systematic review conducted by the study team² found four eligible studies, with a trend towards heightened autism prevalence in psychiatric hospitals relative to the community setting.
- Psychiatric hospitals may be particularly distressing for people with undiagnosed autism, including the risk of misdiagnosis, as well as their environment and treatments not being suitable adapted to their needs.
- Additionally, autism is associated with higher rates of numerous common psychiatric (e.g. anxiety disorders) and physical conditions (e.g. epilepsy), though this issue is poorly understood among adult populations.³



This study aims to:

1: Estimate autism prevalence among adults admitted to acute mental health wards.

2: Estimate rates of co-occurring psychiatric and physical conditions in adults satisfying autism diagnostic criteria relative to their non-autistic peers.

We hypothesised that:

1: Autism prevalence in this group would exceed general population estimates

2: Autistic individuals would have higher rates of co-occurring conditions compared to their non-autistic peers.

Methods

- Phase 1 involved questionnaire testing of non-intellectually disabled adults, including the Autism Quotient (AQ-50).⁴
- Phase 2 involved interview-based diagnostic testing of a subgroup of adults, including all adults with intellectual disability and some adults without intellectual disability (selected via stratified random sampling according to AQ-50 score).
 - Participants were also interviewed for co-occurring psychiatric and physical conditions using the 2014 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey.⁵

Results

- 93 adults participated, with 18 undertaking Phase 2 diagnostic interview (10 non-intellectually disabled; 8 intellectually disabled).
- Of those interviewed (Table 1), 7 out of 18 satisfied ≥ 1 of ICD-10 and/or DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for autism (5/18 satisfying both).**
 - 3 of these patients had a prior autism diagnosis, and 1 had a prior autism diagnosis but did not satisfy either criteria on testing.

Table 1: Autism diagnostic findings.

Subgroup	ICD-10	DSM-5	≥ 1 of ICD-10 or DSM-5	Prior Autism diagnosis
ID	2	2	3	2
Non-ID	4	4	4	2
TOTAL	6	6	7	4

- The mean number of co-occurring psychiatric conditions (Table 2) were similar for individuals satisfying ≥ 1 autism diagnostic criteria relative to those who did not (3.3 vs. 3.5 per person), though they had a greater mean number of co-occurring physical conditions (3.1 vs. 2.4).

Table 2: Numbers of co-occurring conditions.

Subgroup	Psychiatric diagnoses		Physical health diagnoses	
	Total	Mean (SD)	Total	Mean (SD)
Autistic	23	3.3 (1.7)	22	3.1 (2.5)
Non-autistic	39	3.5 (2.1)	26	2.4 (1.9)

Conclusions

- Autism appears more prevalent among adults admitted to acute mental health wards relative to the general population**
- Compared to their non-autistic peers, autistic adults within such settings appear to have similar rates of co-occurring psychiatric diagnoses, but heightened rates of co-occurring physical health diagnoses.
- Clinical implications include a need for widespread training in autism identification across specialities as well as a need to ensure optimal physical healthcare provision for autistic inpatients.**

References

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Figure 1: Study flow chart.

