Pattern of utilisation of telepsychiatry services for geriatric consumers residing in rural and remote South Australia

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Aim: Since the establishment of an independent Older Persons Mental Health Service (OPMHS) in 2010 within the Rural and Remote Mental Health Services (RRMHS) in South Australia, there has been a surge in the demand for telepsychiatry consultations. This study looks closely at the changes in patterns of utilisation over the years to better inform service growth and optimise service delivery.

Objective
- Compare utilisation patterns of telepsychiatry use by geriatric consumers (65 years and over) referred during two distinct years (2010 and 2011).
- Compare demographic details, co-morbid medical conditions, diagnosis and post-consult recommendations for the patient cohort.
- Postulate reasons for changes in utilisation with recommendations for the future development of a nascent service.

Methods and results: The study included a retrospective chart review of consecutive geriatric patients with mental health problems resident in rural and remote South Australia referred to OPMHS, Country Health SA for telepsychiatry assessment between January 2010 and December 2011.

Data comparisons were made for the following specific variables—socio-demographic details, participation of the family/local treating team, co-morbid medical conditions, diagnosis and recommendations made following assessment.

Discussion and conclusions: Interesting differences are observed in the profile of consumers referred to the OPMHS for telepsychiatry assessments with the evolution of the service. We hypothesise that these changes reflect the demand for such services in hitherto underserviced areas. This has important implications for resource allocation and clinical outcomes for the elderly in rural areas. We discuss other hypotheses that might contribute to these changes.

Studies such as these have important relevance to services looking at either expanding existing resources or setting up new services for the elderly.