Humour and acute psychiatry—a world-first randomised controlled trial

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Aims: This study aims to understand the role of humour in therapeutic engagement in an acute psychiatric setting.

Methods: Baseline data comprises a range of information from 80 patients on an acute psychiatric ward. This study has active and then passive exposure audio-taped components. In the active exposure arm, patients are blind and randomly assigned to a treatment and control group. The treatment consists of 15 minutes of a nurse or case worker using themes, with a humorous focus, to encourage the patient to reminisce on their childhood experiences. The control condition is identical but minus a humorous focus. During passive exposure, patients view two short humorous film clips of their choice.

Results: Outcome measures compare changes to therapeutic engagement, mood and expectations between the types of exposure. Quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted to identify clinically pertinent correlations. Results demonstrated clinically significant improvements in therapeutic engagement with the use of humour for short-duration relationships on the ward, the preference of many patients for active humour over passive humour, the minimal risks of using humour in an acute psychiatric setting, and mismatches between negative or neutral expectations of staff and positive outcomes. As well, listening to short excerpts of a range of recordings of the reminiscences provides a rich experience of human interaction when there is a focus on humour in patients who are manic, psychotic, depressed, suicidal or distressed.

Conclusion: Results demonstrate the potential benefits of using humour in an acute psychiatric setting, with some interesting insights into the mind.