Trends in mental health service utilisation for Australian women

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Introduction: In 2006, new Medicare items were rolled out under the ‘Better Access Scheme’ (BAS) to improve access to mental health care. The Australian Longitudinal Study of Women’s Health (ALSWH) data provided an opportunity to examine factors associated with uptake of the BAS by women across three cohorts.

Methods: Participants from the ALSWH were eligible for the study if they had given consent for their survey data to be linked to Medicare data and had responded to the self-reported diagnosis questions on depression/anxiety. The women were aged between 28–33 years, 56–61 years and 79–84 years at the time the BAS was introduced. Participant data was grouped according to BAS use and diagnoses of anxiety/depression.

Results: Approximately 18% of women born 1973–78, 9% born 1945–51 and 2.4% born 1921–26 had used services provided under the BAS initiative. Approximately 20% of women self-reported a diagnosis of depression/anxiety and have not been treated under the BAS for all cohorts. Participants using the BAS initiative were more likely to be taking psychotropic medications, have regular GP consultations and to see a specialist, compared with women who self-reported a diagnosis of depression/anxiety and had not used the BAS, across all cohorts. Area and educational differences were noticed in the 1973–78 cohort, where women living in urban areas and those with higher educational qualifications were more likely to use the BAS services.

Conclusions: While there is a gradual uptake of the new BAS services, a large percentage of women who have self-reported a diagnosis of depression/anxiety have not been treated under the BAS. The data suggests that young women in urban areas have benefited from the services compared to other groups of women.

Key message: Inequity in the distribution of BAS services may still exist.