

GP experiences of facilitating paediatric mental health care access – A qualitative study

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Background

One in eight Australian children and adolescents live with a mental illness¹, which is a leading cause of mortality and morbidity for this age range². Despite the existence of a large variety of youth mental health services, only half of these children access appropriate services³. As the most consulted health professional for this issue in youth, General Practitioners (GPs) can play an essential role in helping these children access mental health care^{1,3}.

Aim

To understand how General Practitioners (GPs) experience negotiating access to mental health care for their child and adolescent patients.

Methods

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design. GPs based in Melbourne, Australia were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were focused on their experiences in helping manage the care of children and adolescents with mental health problems. Interviews were audio-recorded via Zoom™ and transcribed and coded using NVivo. Analysis followed an iterative interpretative approach as exposed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña⁴, including member checking of transcripts.

Results

Twelve GPs in active clinical practice were interviewed by Zoom™ or face-to-face throughout May to July 2023. Their experiences fell into two themes: (i) GPs experiences as essential providers of mental health care and (ii) GPs guiding children through the 'maze' that is the mental health system. These also include subthemes which discuss key experiences of complex care such as diagnosing and rapport building in this patient population and the barriers faced when trying to fight for access in a fragmented system.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the crucial but under-supported role of GPs within the paediatric mental health care system. They are providers of care and a gateway to the healthcare system, helping patients navigate the convoluted mental health space. Participant experiences supported the need for a range of policy and educational interventions such as fostering interprofessional partnerships, optimising remuneration and addressing systemic strain on psychological services.

References

¹ Lawrence, D., et al. (2015). "The mental health of children and adolescents: report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing."

² Baranne, M. L. and B. Falissard (2018). "Global burden of mental disorders among children aged 5–14 years." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 12(1): 19.

³ Productivity Commission (2020). "Mental health: Productivity Commission inquiry report."

⁴ Miles, M. B., et al. (2014). Qualitative data analysis : a methods sourcebook, Thousand Oaks, California : SAGE Publications, Inc.