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Title:

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Date:

2014-01-01

Citation:

Whiteford, H. A., Buckingham, W. J., Harris, M. G., Burgess, P. M., Pirkis, J. E., Barendregt, J. J. & Hall, W. D. (2014). Estimating treatment rates for mental disorders in Australia. *Australian Health Review*, 38 (1), pp.80-85. <https://doi.org/10.1071/AH13142>.

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Manuscript Title: Estimating Treatment Rates for Mental Disorders in Australia

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Abstract

Objective: To estimate the percentage of Australians with a mental disorder who received treatment for that disorder each year between 2006-2007 and 2009-2010.

Design, setting and participants: We used: (1) epidemiological survey data to estimate the number of Australians with a mental disorder in any year; (2) a combination of administrative data on persons receiving mental health care from the Commonwealth and State and Territories and epidemiological data to estimate the number receiving treatment; and (3) uncertainty modelling to estimate the effects of sampling error and assumptions on these estimates.

Main outcome measure: Estimated population treatment rate for mental disorders in Australia.

Results: The estimated population treatment rate for mental disorders in Australia increased from 37% in 2006-07 to 46% in 2009-10. The model estimate for 2006-07 (37%) was very similar to the estimated treatment rate in the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (35%), the only data available for external comparison. The uncertainty modelling suggested that the increased treatment rates over subsequent years could not be explained by sampling error or uncertainty in assumptions.

Conclusions: The introduction of the Commonwealth's Better Access initiative in November 2006 has been the driver for the increased the proportion of Australians with mental disorders who received treatment for those disorders over the period 2006-2007 to 2009-2010.

Introduction

Mental disorders such as anxiety, depression and substance use are a leading cause of disease burden but available evidence suggests that only one third of people with these disorders access treatment.^{1,2} Untreated disorders incur major economic costs and personal suffering.^{3,4}

It is challenging to estimate the proportion of persons with mental disorders who receive treatment for them. The best such estimates come from nationally representative epidemiological surveys with high response rates, but these surveys are expensive and in Australia have only been done in 1997 and 2007. Governments need more timely estimates of treatment rates to assess the effects of policy changes. Such estimates require an indirect methodology.

A major policy change was introduced in Australia in November 2006 when the Commonwealth allowed psychologists and credentialed social workers and occupational therapists to claim Medicare rebates for patients referred by general practitioners. There was a dramatic uptake of these Better Access MBS items⁵ but it is not known whether this increased population treatment rates.

In the absence of another nationally representative population survey we used administrative data on health service utilisation collected by the Commonwealth, states and territories to estimate treatment rates for mental disorders since 2006. Because these data were incomplete we used a number of different data sets and assumptions to fill data gaps. This

paper describes a six step approach to estimate treatment rates for the years 2006-07 to 2009-10.

Methods and Results

Step 1: Population Estimates

Step 1 required population estimates in age groupings (0-15, 16-64, 65-74, 75+) that were selected to align with epidemiological data on prevalence of mental disorders and to allow estimates to be made for those over 65 years of age.⁶

Step 2: Estimated Numbers of Persons with a Mental Disorder in the Past Year

These estimates were made for each age group, drawing on prevalence estimates from Australian and international epidemiological studies. Age specific prevalence estimates for mental disorders were summed to provide a total population prevalence rate for each year (see Table 1).

Prevalence in the 0-15 year age group was estimated using the New South Wales Mental Health Clinical Care and Prevention Model (MH-CCP)⁷ which estimates the prevalence of mental disorder in all age groups. The MH-CCP model estimates were preferred to those from the survey of mental disorders in the Australian child and adolescent population in 1998⁸ because MH-CCP provided an estimate for the 0-15 year age group (rather than the 4-17 year age group covered by the survey).

For the 16-64 year age group, prevalence rates were estimated from the 2007 ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (NSMHWB).⁹ The NSMHWB also enabled estimates to be derived for 65-84 year olds, but the survey sample excluded elderly people in hospitals and aged care residential facilities. We therefore drew our estimates of the prevalence of mental disorders in persons over 65 from the MH-CCP model, which included prevalence estimates among elderly persons in hospitals and aged care.

Step 3: Estimated Number of Persons Receiving Mental Health Treatment in Each Year

In Step 3 we estimated the number of persons receiving treatment from services funded to deliver mental health treatment by combining administrative data sets maintained by the Commonwealth and by states and territories. These are summarised in Table 2.

The ***Commonwealth data*** on mental health specific Medicare Benefit Schedule (MBS) items comprised two patient groups. The first was patient counts derived from GP mental health specific items where a general practitioner was the only provider of the mental health service (MBS funded mental health services - GP only). This included GP-specific MBS items under the Better Access program¹⁰ along with a small number of other mental health items claimable by GPs. Identification of GPs who used these items was essential in estimating the services to people with mental disorder where no MBS mental health specific item was claimed (see Step 4).

The second group was all other MBS mental health specific items that included services delivered by psychiatrists and Better Access-funded allied health providers and a small number

of other allied health professional services such as those provided through the MBS Enhanced Primary Care program (data provided by Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Costing Information & Analysis Section, Medicare Financing and Analysis Branch, Medical Benefits Division, 2011).

For the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), estimates were based on a study that enumerated the number of people in the DVA population treated for a mental disorder in 2000.¹¹ Defence force personnel who received mental health services from in-house Australian Defence Force mental health providers were not counted because no reliable estimates were available.

The ***state and territory data*** came from counts of persons receiving one or more community mental health services submitted by each state and territory to the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing in reporting progress against the National Healthcare Agreement.¹² Data for Victoria had to be adjusted to the per capita estimates of all jurisdictions to take account of its higher threshold for reporting a “case”.

The state and territory counts excluded persons treated as hospital inpatients and in community residential services. No estimate was made for these because state and territory officials advised that the majority of these persons would be counted in community mental health or GP services. The number of individuals remaining in hospital for more than a year was too small to affect the total estimate.

Persons seen in mental health programs provided by non government organisations (NGOs) and funded by state and territory governments were also not included. These provide specialised community support and the majority of these cases would be included in the state clinical services counts. In some jurisdictions, persons treated by state funded community health centres are significant but there were no national unique client counts.

The approximately 24,000 people treated in private psychiatric hospitals were also excluded from the estimates because they would be counted in the MBS data on persons seen by psychiatrists or general practitioners.

Step 4: Persons Receiving Mental Health Care not included in Mental Health Specific Services

In Step 4 we estimated the number of people who received treatment for their mental disorder who were not already included in Step 3. These comprised two main groups. The first group were patients whose GPs did not use MBS mental health items when treating them. We subtracted from the estimated number of people with a current disorder treated by GPs in the 2007 NSMHWB (N=1,032,550) the number of persons treated by GPs using MBS specific items in the 2006-07 MBS data (N=399,051). From these 633,449 persons a further correction was necessary to account for the fact that the 2006-07 MBS data indicate that only 59% of people with a current mental disorder seen by GPs received GP-only mental health care. 59% of the 633,449 persons seen by GPs produced an estimate of 373,518 persons with a current mental disorder who were treated by GPs in 2006-07 and not counted elsewhere in the MBS data. We made estimates for subsequent years after allowing for growth in the number of people treated by GPs since 2006-07 (estimated from Bettering the Evaluation And Care of Health

(BEACH) annual surveys). The BEACH data suggest that after a period of relative stability, the number of GP mental health related encounters increased by 24.0% from 2006-07 to 2009-10, or 16.7% when adjusted for population growth (Table 3).¹³ The estimated overall mental health work load of GPs is shown in Table 4.

The second group are patients receiving mental health care from other service providers not counted elsewhere. This includes patients seen by specialist medical practitioners funded through the MBS (e.g., paediatricians who treat children with mental disorders), public hospitals and regional health centres that do not have a specific mental health unit or team (and are not included in state and territory patient data), mental health services reimbursed by private third party insurers (e.g., accident and injury compensation funds; private health insurance funds) or those self-funded by the patient.

The 2007 NSMHWB estimated that 6.6% of persons with a mental disorder in the past year sought treatment from a 'non mental health specialist' (e.g. 'other doctors', 'other health professionals' and complementary and alternative health practitioners). When those persons who also consulted specialist and non specialist mental health providers were removed, the estimate reduced to 1.6%. This is probably an underestimate because it excludes patients admitted to general hospitals without a specialised psychiatric unit, and people treated by psychiatrists and psychologists whose treatment was funded other than the MBS. In the absence of better information, we used 4.1%, as the midpoint of the 1.6% to 6.6% range, to estimate the number of people treated by 'other health services'.

Table 5 estimates the number of persons with a mental disorder treated by GPs who were not counted elsewhere in MBS data. These estimates declined steeply between 2006 and 2010, reflecting growth in Better Access funded mental health specific GP services. The number of persons with a current mental disorder who sought treatment for that disorder from a 'non mental health specialist' health care practitioner is provided in Table 6.

Step 5: Removing Duplication

Counts within states and territories, and Commonwealth person counts for MBS providers, are of unique clients but persons who receive both Commonwealth and state and territory services will be counted twice. An accurate estimate of the overlap would require linkage of records for individuals. In its absence, we reduced the number of persons treated in state services by 15%. This was based on the proportion of persons seen by state and territory mental health services for 'assessment only' who we assumed would be referred to (and counted in) MBS funded or 'Other health services'. These estimates are shown in Table 7.

Given the foregoing assumptions and analyses, we can estimate treatment rates for mental disorders in Australia in each year by dividing the final patient counts in each year (shown at Step 5) by the estimated number of people who had a mental illness in that year (shown at Step 2). These results are shown in Table 8.

Step 6: Assessing the Effects of Uncertainty on Estimates

We undertook Monte Carlo simulations to assess the effects of uncertainty in key parameters and assumptions used to produce our estimates. This modelling assessed the extent to which apparent increases in the proportion of persons with mental disorders who received mental health treatment may be due to sampling error or uncertainty in key parameters used in the model. The details of this work are described elsewhere⁵ and are available from the authors.

The results of the uncertainty modelling (Table 9) showed three things. First, the estimated proportion of persons with a current mental illness who received treatment increased steadily each year from 37.4% in 2006-2007 to 46.1% in 2009-2010, a 23.3% percentage growth with an absolute increase of 8.7% in the national treatment rates. Second, the 95% confidence intervals indicated uncertainty around each of these estimates but they generally fell within plus or minus 3.9% of the mean estimate. Third, the increase between 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 in the percentage of persons with a mental disorder who received treatment was unlikely to be due to sampling variations data. We can be less confident about the smaller increase between the last two years of the period which may mean a slowing in the percentage treated in the most recent period.

The analysis also indicates the government's policy initiative, the Better Access program, was the sole driver of increased treatment rates for mental disorders. Figure 1 shows the contribution made by Better Access to overall treatment rates estimated by our model. The percentage of persons with a mental disorder who were treated using Better Access mental health services (alone or in addition to other health services) rose from 10.1% in 2006-07 to

27.6% in 2009-10. In 2006-07 Better Access accounted for more than one-quarter (27%) of all persons treated and this increased to 48% in 2007-08, 55% in 2008-09, and 60% in 2009-10.

Discussion

This paper describes the first attempt to estimate changes in treatment rates for mental disorders at a national level in Australia over time using a combination of epidemiological data and administrative data sets. Due to the incomplete nature of these data sets assumptions have had to be made at various stages of the modelling. We have described each of these and believe that overall, we have been conservative.

In addition we have made an attempt to assess the validity of parts of the model. We compared the estimates for 2006-07 derived from service utilisation data at Step 7 with the estimates of treatment rates found in the 2007 NSMHWB, the only source available for external comparison. The NSMHWB found an overall treatment rate of 35% for the Australian population in 2007. Our estimate of 37.3% derived from the 2006-07 administrative data was very close.

The increase in the population treatment rate for mental disorders in Australia from 37% in 2006-07 to 46% in 2009-10 is remarkable by international standards. No other country of which we are aware has demonstrated such an increase within three years. Data on the severity symptoms reported by persons treated under Better Access suggest that this is not simply an artefact of GP consultations for other than mental disorders being claimed for providing mental health care.⁵

Unless there are changes to the Commonwealth funded MBS programs for mental health care, we expect treatment rates to continue to rise, but by how much is an important policy issue that is outside the scope of this paper. We also recognise that increased access to services is not sufficient to ensure good outcomes for those with mental disorders. It is also important to ensure that evidence based treatment is provided to those Australians accessing these services.

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Acknowledgements

This paper is based on work originally commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and draws on national datasets provided by the department.

Table 1: Estimated prevalence and number of persons with a mental disorder by age group

Age group	Prevalence	Number of people with 12 month disorders			
		2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
0-15	15.4%	674,141	681,546	690,366	697,657
16-64	22.2%	3,089,046	3,158,081	3,230,351	3,282,449
65-74	13.6%	197,087	202,750	210,740	219,523
75+	16.1%	210,359	214,342	218,280	223,092
Total	20.1%	4,170,634	4,256,720	4,349,738	4,422,721

Table 2: Estimated numbers of persons with a current mental illness seen by mental health specific services

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
State and Territory mental health services	353,068	352,388	363,203	367,870
MBS funded mental health services - GP only	235,285	386,885	485,056	533,261
MBS funded mental health services not included in the counts above	413,990	620,519	740,455	833,519
DVA mental health care	63,415	60,815	58,151	55,628
Total	1,065,758	1,420,607	1,646,865	1,790,278

Table 3: Per capita growth in GP mental health encounters, 2006-07 to 2009-10

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Mental health-related encounters per 1,000 population (BEACH)	514	560	610	600
Cumulative growth in mental health encounters per 1000 since 2006-07		8.9%	18.7%	16.7%

Table 4: Number and percent of population consulting a GP for a mental disorder, 2006-07 to 2009-10

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Estimate of number of people with a mental disorder treated by GPs	1,032,550	1,147,704	1,277,320	1,277,950
Percent of population	4.9%	5.3%	5.8%	5.7%

Table 5: Persons with a mental disorder treated by a GP not counted in MBS mental health specific items, 2006-07 to 2009-10

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Estimate of number of people with a mental disorder treated by GPs (A)	1,032,550	1,147,704	1,277,320	1,277,950
Number of people recorded as treated by GPs under MBS mental health specific items (B)	399,051	728,274	920,398	1,038,051
Estimated person undercount in MBS mental health specific GP data (C=A - B)	633,499	419,430	356,922	239,899
Estimated % GP-only mental health care (D)	59.0%	53.1%	52.7%	51.4%
Estimate of number of people with a mental disorder treated exclusively by GPs who are not counted in MBS data (E=C x D)	373,518	222,816	188,100	123,240
As percent of number of people with a mental disorder treated by GPs (= E ÷ A)	36.2%	19.4%	14.7%	9.6%

Table 6: Estimated numbers of persons with a current mental illness seen by other health services

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
MBS funded GP services not billed as mental health items	373,518	222,816	188,100	123,240
Other health service providers	170,996	174,526	178,339	181,332
Total	544,514	397,342	366,440	304,571

Table 7: Persons with a current mental disorder seen by health services with duplication removed

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
State and Territory MHS, adjusted to remove duplication	300,108	299,530	308,722	312,689
MBS funded mental health services - GP only	235,285	386,885	485,056	533,261
MBS funded services - other providers +/- GP	413,990	620,519	740,455	833,519
DVA mental health care	63,415	60,815	58,151	55,628
MBS funded GP services not billed as mental health items	373,518	222,816	188,100	123,240
Other health services	170,996	174,526	178,339	181,332
Total	1,557,313	1,765,091	1,958,824	2,039,668

Table 8: Estimated percentages of Australians with a current mental illness who received mental health treatment, 2006-07 to 2009-10

	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
State and Territory MHS (adjusted)	7.2%	7.0%	7.1%	7.1%
MBS funded mental health services - GP only	5.6%	9.1%	11.2%	12.1%
MBS funded services - other providers +/- GP	9.9%	14.6%	17.0%	18.8%
DVA mental health care	1.5%	1.4%	1.3%	1.3%
MBS funded GP services not billed as mental health items	9.0%	5.2%	4.3%	2.8%
Other health services	4.1%	4.1%	4.1%	4.1%
Total	37.3%	41.5%	45.0%	46.1%

Table 9: Percentage of persons with a mental disorder treated, results of uncertainty modelling

Year	Mean	95% confidence interval
2006-07	37.4	35.0 – 39.6
2007-08	41.5	39.7 – 43.7
2008-09	45.0	42.7 – 47.3
2009-10	46.1	43.8 – 48.4

Figure 1: Percentage of persons with mental disorders in the total Australian population treated using Better Access mental health services and other health services, 2006-07 to 2009-10

