

Press release: European College of Neuropsychopharmacology

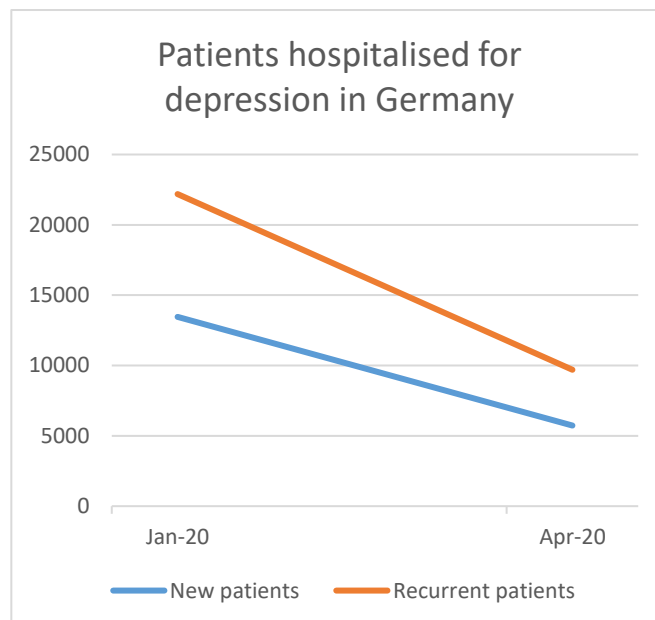
Patients with clinical depression “stopped seeking treatment” during the COVID waves

Embargo until: 00.05 (CEST, Vienna) Sunday 16th October 2022

Not peer reviewed/observational study/people*

In the first study of its kind, German researchers have shown that the COVID pandemic saw a huge drop in the number of patients being admitted to hospital for clinical depression. Independently of these national statistics, the researchers found that the number of outpatients they dealt with increased over the same period in their department. As inpatient treatment offers more intensive levels of care, this implies that many patients did not receive care appropriate to their condition. It is not yet known if this shift in treatment is also seen in other countries.

The researchers, from the University Hospital in Frankfurt, looked at German national databases. They found that during the first COVID wave new hospitalisations for first time clinical depression dropped by 57.5%, from 13457 in January 2020 down to 5723 in April 2020. In the same period, the number of patients being hospitalised for recurrent depression dropped by 56.3%, from 22188 down to 9698.



Lead researcher, Dr Mareike Aichholzer said *“We also saw a decrease in inpatient treatment of recurrent depression in our own hospital in Frankfurt. In addition to the stricter admission rules, this rather seemed to be due to a drop in demand from the patients themselves”*.

In contrast, the number of new outpatients being treated for clinical depression at the University Hospital in Frankfurt remained stable and the number of patients with recurrent depression showed a significant increase between 2019 and 2021. However, Dr Aichholzer notes *“This is data from a single centre, so we need to wait to see what other centres say”*.

She continued, *“The results indicate that patients who have repeatedly suffered from depression during their lives were less likely to be admitted to hospital during the pandemic. However, these patients are often so severely affected by depression that outpatient treatment alone is not sufficient to bring about a satisfactory improvement in symptoms. The result is that patients lose their quality of life in the long term. The actual reason for this observation is unclear. Although our study was not designed to identify the reasons for those changes, we however suspect that clinically depressed patients in particular withdraw more often from society/their friends/their family and that this behaviour was more common during the times of the lock-down and the strict hygiene guidelines. Moreover, we suspect, that clinically depressed patients avoided the hospital, because they were afraid of being infected with COVID-19 on the ward.*

The data from our hospital in Frankfurt indicates that patients with clinical depression seem to have withdrawn themselves, rather than seeking adequate mental health help. To be prepared for the winter with potentially increasing COVID numbers, we have to provide easily accessible help and raise awareness for this topic”.

Clinical depression, also known as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is a serious mental illness, affecting more than 6% of Europeans at any one time. The majority of sufferers can be treated with pharmaceuticals and/or counselling, although a minority of patients don't respond to treatment.

Commenting, Professor Brenda Penninx, Professor of psychiatric epidemiology at the Department of Psychiatry, University Medical Centre, Amsterdam, said:

“The figures found by the Frankfurt team confirm a familiar pattern. We have recently found that quite a few countries are beginning to report a decreased pattern of mental health care use during the first pandemic years. It is extremely important that in the next few years we follow whether postponed treatments may result in increased mental health problems. This also illustrates that mental health care deserves adequate clinical attention during future pandemics”.

This is an independent comment, Professor Penninx was not involved in this research.

Notes

Poster P.0127 *Impact of covid-19 on German treatment numbers of patients with depression – a gap in care for the mentally ill?* (researchers M. Aichholzer, C. Schiweck, C.Uckermark, T.Hamzehloiya, C.Reif-Leonhard, A. Reif, and S. Edwin Thanarajah) will be presented at the 35th European College of Neuropsychopharmacology annual conference, which takes place in Vienna and online from 15-18 October, see <https://www.ecnp.eu/Congress2022/ECNPcongress>. Up to 5000 delegates are expected to attend. The ECNP is Europe's main organisation working in applied neuroscience.

*Press release labelling system for journalists, see <https://tinyurl.com/3kww75hy> for details

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Notes for Editors

Conference Abstract: P.0127 *Impact of covid-19 on German treatment numbers of patients with depression – a gap in care for the mentally ill?*

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Background: The Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions of daily life have been a major challenge for mental health. The number of newly diagnosed cases of depression and anxiety has increased worldwide [1, 2] and patients with known psychiatric conditions experienced a worsening of symptoms [3]. At the same time, psychiatric care was limited by safety regulations and constraints of the health care system, that became more evident during the pandemic.

Aims: With this study we aimed to investigate whether in- and outpatient care of patients with first depressive episode and major depressive disorder (MDD) was impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany.

Methods: Nationwide data was extracted from the database of the German Institute for Hospital Remuneration System, a state agency that registers anonymized inpatient numbers and provide public access for the years 2020 and 2021. We tested changes in inpatients numbers (children and adults) for these two years in relation to the nationwide Covid-19 incidence rate retrieved from the Robert-Koch-Institute. Since these data neither allow a comparison with pre-covid years nor give an insight into outpatient care, we investigated the cases at our department for the same period in comparison to 2019. The change in patient numbers in Frankfurt across all months for 2020 and 2021 in comparison to 2019 were tested in a one-way ANOVA after checking for normal distribution. The Dunnett's multiple comparisons test was conducted post-hoc.

Results: The nationwide numbers of Covid-19 cases and depressive inpatients showed opposing courses throughout 2020 and 2021 for both children and adults. During the first Covid wave in April 2020, the number of treated patients with 1) a first-time depressive episode decreased by 57.5% and 2) a recurrent depressive disorder decreased by 56.3% in comparison to January 2020. In our department, the number of inpatients with MDD significantly decreased in 2020 (adj. $p < 0.0001$, 95% CI 12.20-29.30) as well as 2021 (adj. $p < 0.0001$, 95% CI 12.54-29.63) compared to the pre-covid year 2019. The average numbers of patients treated with first episode depression remained the same across the years, but we saw a clear drop during every Covid-19 wave. The average number of outpatients treated for first episode remained unchanged during the pandemic, whereas MDD outpatient numbers showed a significant increase between 2019 and 2021 (adj. $p = 0.0012$, 95% CI -134.6-43.37). While MDD numbers declined during every wave, the number of first episode patients raised in parallel to the Covid incidence rate.

Conclusion: Our data exhibit that depressive patients, especially at times of high covid-19 infection rates, are less frequently tended for as inpatients. The data from Frankfurt demonstrates, that particularly MDD patients were significantly less often treated on a psychiatric ward during the pandemic, while the numbers of first episode patients remained the same. MDD patients seem to have withdrawn themselves more instead of seeking adequate help, which was facilitated by the safety regulations. These data highlight a disadvantage for people with depression during the pandemic and show the immense need for an improved care structure.

Funding: the research was supported by internal institutional research funds of the Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatic Medicine of the University Hospital Frankfurt, Goethe University, Germany.