

Victims' use of professional services in a Dutch sexual assault center

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Background

Prior research endorsed the establishment of sexual assault centers in the Netherlands because of the potential benefit for victims' mental recovery. In 2012, the first Dutch sexual assault center was founded at the University Medical Center Utrecht. The aim of the center is to provide 24/7 coordinated and integrated services (i.e., medical, forensic, and psychological) in one location.

Aims

To describe demographic, background, and assault characteristics of victims seen at the center within one week post-assault, and their use of post-assault services in order to improve current services.

Methods

From January 2012 to January 2016, prospective data of 250 patients were collected. To describe the population included, frequency counts and proportions were generated for categorical variables.

Results

The mean age was 22 years (SD 9.8). Most victims were female (92%). A large proportion of victims reported background characteristics known to increase the risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and revictimisation such as prior sexual abuse (34%), pre-existing use of mental health services (43%), and not living with both biological parents (61.7%). Most patients (85.7%) consulted the center within 72 hours post-assault. The uptake of services was high: 88% received emergency medical care, 54% underwent a forensic medical exam, 36% reported to the police, and 82% utilized psychological services.

Discussion

The present findings showed that most victims presenting at a hospital-based sexual assault center within one week post-assault were females between 12 and 25 years, who experienced penetrating assault by a known male adult. The victims reported high rates of prior victimisation, pre-existing use of mental health services, use of prescribed medication and poor living conditions (i.e., housing and parental support). Their usage of post-assault services was high and one-third decided to officially report to the police.

Conclusions

Considering that the sample consisted of severe cases with various needs, the multidisciplinary approach used seemed appropriate. Future research should aim at finding evidence for the benefit of immediate care as provided in sexual assault centers for victims'

(mental) health and the judicial process.