

Audit has recently been defined as "the systematic critical analysis of quality", the three components of 'quality' being effectiveness, efficiency and acceptability (Metcalf, 1989).

To assess the effectiveness of this service at Sighthill Health Centre, impact has been examined in terms of patient outcome and the effect on GP workload. General practice casenotes proved an unsatisfactory means of assessing patient outcome as frequently this information was not recorded. Williams & Balestrieri (1989) reported that the development of general practice-based psychiatric clinics in England and Wales was related to a decrease in psychiatric hospital admissions, due primarily to an effect on the admission of non-psychotic patients. The fact that only one patient in our study required hospital admission in the six months after referral cannot in itself be taken as a measure of good outcome.

Psychiatric referral was followed by a decrease in GP surgery attendances, most marked in those who were high attenders prior to referral. Psychiatric appointments did not merely replace GP appointments, but served to decrease significantly the burden placed by high attenders on the GP. The psychiatrist did not, therefore, duplicate the work of the GP, and efficient use was made of medical time.

In assessing the acceptability of the service to GPs, we found that 75% of recommendations were followed fully. Few studies have examined this outcome measure. However, in Gask's study of 30 new out-patients seen once only in a hospital out-patient clinic, recommendations made to the GP on 19

patients were carried out fully for only four (Gask, 1986). We speculate that the greater acceptability of our recommendations to the GPs is due to better communication between doctors facilitated by the psychiatrists visiting the health centre as well as the more informal style of psychiatric practice.

We conclude that GP casenotes are a useful source of information for the audit of specialist services, especially where specialist contact with the patient is likely to be brief. Limitations of this source have been mentioned above. We recommend that formal feedback be obtained from GPs, both to assess patient outcome, and to obtain a direct measure of their satisfaction with the service provided.

References

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Christmas holiday

The College will be closed from 6.00 p.m. on Friday, 21 December 1990 and will reopen at 8.00 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 January 1991.