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# **Are there effects of consultation-liaison-psychiatry on length of stay in the general hospital? A path analysis**

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## **Abstract**

### Background and objectives

Recently, several publications have addressed interactions between selected factors related to the role of consultation-liaison (CL) psychiatric interventions and length of stay (LOS) in the general hospital anew. Yet at present, recent available research is restricted in the scope of factors studied. This study aims at providing an analysis of factors associated with LOS in a large sample of patients, with a broad set of variables and by accounting for the complex relationships between them.

### Methods

Retrospective cohort analysis of n=3190 adult patients referred to the CL-psychiatry service of a general hospital. Univariate statistics and multiple regression were used to assess the association between patient characteristics and LOS. Path analysis was used to elucidate the mediating role of time-to-referral (TTR).

### Results

Univariate analysis and multiple regression showed that TTR, age, and poor general functioning were associated with longer LOS. Diagnosis on Axis I+II (according to DSM), suicidal ideation and somatic

diagnosis had no significant association with LOS. The four variables with the strongest total effect on LOS in the path analysis were TTR, the year of consultation, age and general functioning. Age had a higher indirect effect on LOS, while general functioning had a higher direct effect on LOS.

## Conclusions

In the path model, TTR is a highly significant predictor of LOS and also a mediator of other predictors. This highlights the role of the CL-psychiatrist in the management of patients in the general hospital. Further research should investigate how referrals are prioritized by consultees and which different effects consultation recommendations might have on LOS.

## Introduction

There is renewed interest in the association of consultation-liaison (CL) psychiatric interventions and length of stay (LOS), in a context where many health systems are in the process of reshaping their case-based hospital payment systems. Earlier studies suggested that timely consultations are associated with shorter LOS. Yet, during the end of the 1990s, interest in LOS and its possible reduction by CL somewhat subsided in the context of a marked general reduction of LOS as a consequence of the introduction of diagnosis related groups (DRGs) for general hospital inpatients. In addition, further scrutiny showed that the formerly hypothesized correlations were more complex, e.g. with possibly differential effects of distinct CL-psychiatric recommendations on LOS, such as additional referral to social work or prescription of psychotropic drugs (1–4).

A recent surge of analyses has addressed possible interactions between factors associated with LOS anew. For example, Sockalingam et al. (2016) reported that patients with longer time to referral (TTR) had significantly longer LOS, even after controlling for severity of medical comorbidity (5). In pediatric patients, earlier psychiatric consultation was associated with shorter LOS and lower costs after adjusting for psychological functioning, physical illness severity, and the availability of

subsequent psychiatric care options; poorer psychiatric functioning and milder physical illness were associated with shorter TTR (6).

Yet, available research often studied selected aspects omitting a larger body of variables that seem relevant (7–9), which is often related to the size of the sample. Such missing factors include e.g. the so-called lag time 2 (from referral to consultation - RTC), the effects of psychotropic medication (e.g. adverse effects of psychotropic drugs prescribed by the CL-psychiatrist) and overall physical and psychological functioning.

Therefore, as main focus we present a path analysis of factors associated with LOS in a large sample of adult patients referred to CL psychiatry, with a broad set of variables and accounting for the complex relationships between them based on clinical hypotheses, as reported previously (1–4). Based on clinical experience as visualized in Figure 1, we hypothesized an association between TTR and LOS; the year of consultation and LOS (1); and a more rapid discharge if no institutional bed has to be found (6). Finally, we assumed age and general and psychosocial functioning to have an influence on all other variables. Some of the links between variables have been tested in an earlier analysis of a sub-sample excluding patients without a psychiatric diagnosis (10).

## **Methods**

### Design and population

The present study is a retrospective cohort analysis of patients referred to the CL psychiatry service of Mount Sinai Hospital (MSH), New York City, between 1988 and 1997. The cohort includes all patients whose psychiatric consultation was requested by a somatic ward. MSH is a tertiary care university hospital of 1,200 beds and 30,000 inpatient admissions per year during the study period. Since several specialty units (e.g. gerontology, HIV/AIDS) employ their own psychiatrists or psychologists (and are thus not included in this analysis), consultations requests were issued predominantly by general medical or surgical wards. In total, 3032 patients with a diagnosis of Axis I and/or II of the DSM-III-R classification system between the ages of 17-65, who did not have private

insurance (the latter received care through private attending physicians), were included. For an additional 158 patients of the cohort, no psychiatric diagnosis was coded or missing, leading to a total cohort size of 3190 patients.

Multiple regression analysis excluded 23 patients, for whom data on psychiatric and/or somatic main diagnosis were not available.

### Data collection

Patient characteristics and the data reflecting the consultation process were collected using the MICRO-CARES Consortium Psychiatric Consultation Questionnaire (11). Documentation was performed by the consultant psychiatrists only. In order to ensure reliability, residents were supervised by the head of the CL psychiatry service and training was provided using case vignettes. Psychiatric diagnosis was made by the consultant psychiatrists based on clinical interviews without the use of structured diagnostic interviews.

### Variables

Demographic characteristics (age, gender, living situation, job status, psychiatric treatment during the previous year, reason for the consultation) were recorded at the initiation of the consultation, as well as the somatic (based on ICD-9) and psychiatric diagnoses. The Karnofsky Index, scaled from 0 to 100 (low values indicate a high need for care), was used to assess general functioning and morbidity during the month preceding the admission. The global assessment of functioning (GAF) was applied as a measure of psychological, occupational and social functioning, with low values indicating poor functioning.

Process variables included lag time 1 (TTR, time from hospital admission to requesting a psychiatric consultation), lag time 2 (RTC, time from referral to consultation) and LOS. The consultant psychiatrist also assessed, on request by ward staff, whether discharge against medical advice (AMA) was possible or not. If psychotropic medication was recommended by the consultant, adverse

reactions were recorded. For the discharge location, we distinguished home from all other options.

The year of the consultation was managed as a continuous variable in order to account for changes in case-mix and discharge practice over time.

In order to reduce the influence of outliers and the skewed distribution of LOS, logarithmic transformation of the data was performed. For 25 patients with a LOS-value of zero, these values were transformed from zero to one in order to include them in the analysis. Missing data was not missing completely at random and treated using the full-information maximum likelihood method (12) under SPSS, except for the psychiatric and somatic main diagnoses which showed too many dimensions.

### Analysis

A path analysis was employed in order to account for the complex relationships between the variables. Based on structural equation modeling, this technique allows to distinguish direct from indirect effects, in the sense of a mediation analysis. In such a model, the direct effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable is described by a path coefficient, controlling for other variables just as in a multiple regression analysis. The indirect effect is the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable mediated by variables on the paths between them. Finally, the total effect of one variable on another is the sum of the direct and indirect effects (13).

In order to keep the path model as parsimonious as possible, we first performed univariate and multiple regression analyses of variables associated with LOS. Only variables with a p-value of  $< .05$  in univariate and multiple regression analyses were kept for the subsequent steps of the analysis.

The fit indices used for the path analysis were the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (14). To evaluate RMSEA, values of  $< .05$  demonstrate a good fit to the model (15). TLI and CFI values of  $> 0.90$  and  $0.95$  respectively are considered as marginal and good fits (16).

All analyses were performed using SPSS version 20.

## **Results**

### Description of the cohort

The mean age of patients in our cohort was 44.0 years ( $\pm 12.6$ ), with 52% male patients.

Average LOS was 20.5 days ( $\pm 32.8$ ), TTR was 10.9 days ( $\pm 41.1$ ) and RTC .66 day ( $\pm 1.51$ ) (see Table 1).

The leading main psychiatric diagnoses were organic mental disorders (23.4%), adjustment disorder (19.3%) and substance related disorders (18.1%) (see Table 2).

The somatic main diagnoses were most frequently neoplasms (15.0%), followed by disorders of the digestive system (13.9%) and infectious diseases (11.6%) (see Table 3).

### Univariate and multiple regression of LOS

Due to non-significance at a level of .05, we excluded GAF ( $p = .345$ ), diagnosis on Axis I ( $p = .807$ ) and lag time 2 ( $p = .879$ ) from the subsequent steps of analysis.

In multiple regression of LOS, the strongest significant association was observed between TTR and LOS (stand. Beta .666); followed by the Karnofsky index (stand. Beta -.095); and the assessment of AMA (stand. Beta .077).

Suicidal ideation, diagnosis of personality disorder, the type of somatic diagnosis and a history of major psychiatric treatment in the previous year had neither statistically significant nor clinically relevant associations with LOS and were not retained for the path analysis (see Table 4).

### Path analysis

The model relationships with standardized regression weights are described below (Figure 1). All associations were significant at a level of  $p < .01$ , except for: age and discharge location; age and year of consultation; age and urgency; general functioning (as measured by the Karnofsky index) and

urgency as well as general functioning and drug side effects; which were not significant at a level of  $p < .05$ . Overall, the findings indicate that the model fits well, with RMSEA .049, TLI .911 and CFI .968.

The four variables with the strongest total model effect on LOS were TTR, year of consultation, age and general functioning (see supplementary Table 1 for detailed data on standardized effects). While longer TTR and higher age predicted an increase in LOS, better general functioning and a later year of consultation were associated with shorter LOS. Age had a higher indirect effect on LOS (i.e. through intermediate variables (17)), mostly mediated by TTR, while overall functioning had a higher direct effect on LOS. Of all four variables, TTR had the strongest effect on LOS.

While with a later year of consultation, and higher general functioning (as measured by the Karnofsky Index), TTR decreased in the model, higher age was a predictor of longer TTR. Of all clinical and patient variables (i.e. excluding the year of consultation), age had the strongest effect on TTR (Figure1).

## **Discussion**

To the best of our knowledge, this study presents the largest cohort of CL psychiatry patients to have been systematically investigated for factors related to LOS. The main finding of our analysis is the quantification of the key role of time to referral (TTR) as predictor of LOS. In the available literature, regression coefficients of TTR and LOS were .42 in multiple regression (7), and .50 in a path analysis in pediatric patients (6). Sockalingam et al. have used a 3-component finite mixture of exponential regression models, where TTR was significantly associated with LOS in each of the 3 components. In univariate analysis, the Spearman correlation coefficient was .77 (5). Hence, with a coefficient of .67 in our sample, the share of variance explained by TTR in the present analysis is slightly above the range of other multivariate models and in our view seems to be coherent.

Our path analysis suggests that TTR is a mediator for several other variables, including, most importantly, age and general functioning, while keeping in mind that patients older than 65 years were not included in our study. To the best of our knowledge, a general positive correlation between