

## **Knowledge Notes**

### **Short versus long hospital stays for psychiatric patients**

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#### **Objectives**

To summarize and review the issue of short versus long hospital stays for psychiatric patients.

#### **Issue**

For almost 50 years there has been ongoing debate on the social theory that short hospitalization (the definition of short hospitalization varies widely) for psychosis with rapid return to the community to decrease social isolation and facilitate community reintegration is beneficial. Such short stay patients show better quality of life and larger social networks, reduced dependence on pharmaceuticals and lower mortality rates. Led by a drive to reduce costs, most Western countries have developed policies of reducing periods of hospitalization for patients with psychosis and concomitantly reducing the numbers of available beds for patients with psychosis. Other reports (e.g. from Denmark) indicate that deinstitutionalization policies lead to premature discharge, a 100% increase in suicide, doubling of criminal acts committed by psychotic patients and 80-100% increases in acute admissions. Hospital stays of less than 14 days were significantly associated with increased suicide rates. A Cochrane review meta-analysis indicated that short stay hospitalization patients programmed in advance as a short stay did not increase the risk of a readmission.

Hospital stay is shortest when community care is well developed, but long-term hospitalization will always be required for a small number of severely ill patients. This emphasizes the importance of adequate discharge planning and the availability of community resources. Only about 50% of hospitalizations over 30 days can be medically justified while about 40% are accounted for by social circumstances.

#### **Conclusions**

Although widely adopted, policies of short hospitalization were not instituted as an evidence-based policy or practice, and there is a lack of adequate systematic evaluation studies on the social, clinical or other consequences.

There is a need for adequate evaluative studies to determine best practice guidelines on length of stay regardless of economic advantages to health care systems associated with short stay.

#### **References**

Capdevielle D., Ritchie K. The long and the short of it: are shorter periods of hospitalizations beneficial? *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2008) 192, 164-165.