

Harm in Hospital: Protecting teens from the harms posed by psychiatric hospitalisation

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Background:

More adolescents than ever are being hospitalised in psychiatric inpatient units in mental health crisis. Whilst research generally supports treatment in hospital for teens, there are growing concerns in the literature that, particularly for certain patients, psychiatric hospitalisation can be more harmful than helpful.

Approach:

We analyse the relevant empirical literature, theoretical perspectives, and our own experiences working with hospitalised adolescents to outline the various harms faced by teens who experience psychiatric hospitalisation.

Outcome:

The organisational and service structures of psychiatric inpatient units are at risk of escalating maladaptive coping strategies for teens, interfering with normative developmental processes, consolidating already ruptured attachment systems, and perpetuating unhelpful avoidance tendencies. Moreover, teens in psychiatric units are regularly exposed to negative social contagion effects and potentially traumatising experiences, which may have longstanding detrimental impacts on their sense of self-identity and overall emotional wellbeing.

Innovation and Significance:

This is the first project of its kind to appraise the harms of psychiatric hospitalisation for adolescents. We present clinical guidelines for inpatient units to help minimize these harms for the vulnerable teens that find themselves in hospital.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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Author Biographies

Dr Matteo Zuccala and Dr Shannon Webb are Clinical Psychologists and Early Career Researchers from the Brolga Adolescent Inpatient Psychiatric Unit, Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Hospital. Since completing their PhDs they have maintained clinical practice alongside continuing research leadership roles within the Child and Youth Mental Health Service.