

Management by geographical area or management specialised by disorder? A mixed-methods evaluation of the effects of an organisational intervention on secondary mental health care for common mental disorder

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

In 2009 South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM) decided to reorganise its services. Separate directorates that had provided mental health care to adults living in each of four London boroughs were replaced by a set of Clinical Academic Groups (CAGs) that worked across boroughs and divided the work between them according to the similarity of patient problems and needs, rather than where patients live. We used interviews with patients and staff and data in electronic patient records to investigate this reorganisation, looking especially at depression, anxiety and personality disorders.

Patients were unclear about the changes and their consequences. Staff were more positive and described a radical reorganisation that identified services that were not covering their costs, reassigned patients to restructured clinical teams and achieved financial stability. The restructuring was supported by the development of 'care pathways', originally conceived as a way of standardising care for particular illnesses or problems, but used by SLaM as 'high-level' representations of how teams should work.

Broadly, we found that services were now seeing fewer patients. It seemed that CAGs had not changed how effective or safe treatment was. There were mixed effects on waiting times. Just looking at community mental health teams, there was no clear evidence that costs had altered, although significant cost savings had been made in some of the CAGs' specialist services. Our main conclusion for SLaM was that more work is needed to address those aspects of quality of care that the use of 'high-level' pathways left unexamined.

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