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Research Article

Linkage of routinely collected NHS data to evaluate liaison mental health services: challenges and lessons learned

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Background
Liaison mental health services are based in acute general hospitals and provide assessment and treatment for people who have both physical and mental health problems.

Aim
Our aim was to use routinely collected National Health Service data to find out whether general hospital patients referred to liaison mental health services have improved outcomes, compared with patients not referred to liaison services, and comparable patients in hospitals where there are no liaison services. The main outcomes were less time spent in hospital and fewer re-admissions to hospital following discharge.

Method
We tried to link data from routine National Health Service sources for hospital and primary care, to compare patients referred to liaison mental health services with similar people in each hospital who had not been referred, and similar people in hospitals without any liaison services at all. We planned to find out how long these people stayed in hospital, whether they were re-admitted and how much was their healthcare cost was.

Results
We experienced significant difficulties in being able to link the National Health Service data from the different organisations we approached. The whole process was extremely complex, and a delay in one part of the process resulted delays in other parts. We eventually had to abandon the research without obtaining any meaningful data, although the lessons we learnt will be useful for other researchers, so they can avoid experiencing similar problems.

Conclusions
Routinely collected National Health Service data from primary care and secondary care can be linked using the approaches we tried, but we were unable to complete the process within the time frame of the research programme, even with time extensions. Current processes need to be streamlined and standardised with designated clear response times for the different organisations.