

Clinicians' perspectives on supporting individuals with severe anorexia nervosa in specialist eating disorder intensive treatment settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Publication

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Abstract

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected intensive treatment settings (i.e., inpatient [IP] and day patient [DP]) in specialist eating disorder services. However, the impact on clinicians working in these services is largely unknown. We therefore explored the perspectives of those supporting individuals with severe anorexia nervosa (AN) in intensive treatment settings during the pandemic.

Methods

Between May 2020 and June 2021, we interviewed clinicians ($n = 21$) who delivered IP and/or DP treatment to patients with severe AN in four specialist eating disorder services in the United Kingdom. Data relating to experiences during COVID-19 were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results

We identified six themes: Disruptions to Routine Treatment; Introduction of Virtual Treatment; Separation from Treatment, Others and the World; Impact on Recovery; Impact on Staff; and Pressure on Referral Pathways. COVID-19 posed significant challenges to IP and DP services: forcing closures, operating with restrictions and virtual treatment, and impacting delivery of essential treatment components, referral pathways, clinician wellbeing, risk management, and patient isolation and recovery trajectories. Opportunities arose, in particular in DP services offering virtual support.

Conclusions

COVID-19 challenged the continuation of multidisciplinary treatment. The findings underline the necessity for medical, psychological, practical, and nutritional support, as well as carer involvement and fostering social connections to remain at the forefront of intensive treatment for severe AN. They also emphasise the uncertainty surrounding which intensive treatment may be best suited to which patient when, particularly within the context of virtual DP support.

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