EXCESSIVE USE OF MEDICAL CARE
OR
RATIONAL PATIENT BEHAVIOUR?

A STUDY OF A LARGE HOSPITAL EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

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EXCESSIVE USE OF MEDICAL CARE
OR
RATIONAL PATIENT BEHAVIOUR?
A study of a large hospital emergency department

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The role of hospital emergency departments has over the years
been gradually extended, especially in large urban areas. In
Stockholm, visits to hospital emergency departments increased by
30 per cent between 1973 and 1977. The southwestern district, one
of Stockholm's five health care districts, has had the highest
visiting rates - since 1975 40 per cent above average. A large
university hospital, the Huddinge Hospital, was opened in this
district in 1972.

The study is an inquiry into the use of the Huddinge Hospital
emergency department by the population in its catchment area.
The study encompassed not only those who used the emergency de­
partment but an approximately 10 per cent sample (17 004 people)
of the population. Data was collected from the hospital emergency
department, medical records, by interviews with users and non­
users and from registers.

During the 15 months' observation (January 1976 to March 1977)
29 per cent of the population visited the hospital emergency de­
partment (range for different subareas 22 to 46 per cent). The
total number of visits was 566 per 1 000 population.

Compared with Swedish citizens, immigrants more often visited the
emergency department (19 per cent more visits) but less often
used the hospital outpatient clinics. Marked differences between
Swedes and immigrants were found in illness behaviour.

The role of proximity in the use of the hospital emergency depart­
ment was analysed by dividing the catchment area into 20 subareas.
The subareas closer to the hospital had up to four times higher
visiting rates compared with areas further away. The travelling
distance to the hospital and the proportion of immigrants together
explained 81 per cent of the differences in visiting rates between
the subareas.

In one geographically defined subarea, 15 per cent of the popu­
lation visited district GPs while 30 per cent visited the hospital
emergency department. An estimated 39 to 64 per cent of the visits
to the hospital emergency department were general practitioner­
type cases.

In a representative sample of users and non-users of the emergency
department, strong association was found between health status,
social factors and the level of use of the emergency department.

The hospital emergency department is a major source of medical
care for the population in the catchment area. A considerable
part of its diversified role is to compensate for the low capacity
of the primary care services in the area.

Key words: Emergency services - medical care utilization - primary
care - heavy use - social factors