Medical Issues in Foster Youth Referred for Mental Health Treatment

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Foster Care Research Group

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**BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

- Children in foster care have higher rates of medical problems compared to those not in foster care.
- Health professionals typically have little or no training regarding issues specific to foster children and may not recognize problems or refer these children for appropriate care.
- The relationship between mental health and health problems among foster youth has not been adequately explored.
- Two-thirds of funds allocated for medical treatment of foster youth is spent on the 8% of children diagnosed or identified with psychiatric disorders, neurologic conditions and other chronic medical diseases.
- The purpose of the study is to determine the medical conditions experienced by foster children referred for mental health treatment.

**METHOD**

**Participants**
- The intake forms completed for 107 foster youth referred for mental health treatment through a national non-profit agency were randomly selected from all forms completed between February, 2002 and July, 2012.
- 63% Female
- Mean Age = 15.74 years (SD = 7.7628)

**Measure**
- Semi-structured intake form about patient demographics, reason for referral, symptoms, diagnosis, as well as biological parent and patient medical history.

**Procedure**
- Intake forms completed by staff of non-profit agency when referrer calls to refer a current or former foster youth for mental health treatment.
- Completed intake forms emailed to research team as PDF files.
- PDFs of intake forms entered, coded, and analyzed by research team.

**Analyses**
- Intake form data was coded twice by trained research assistants using a coding scheme developed in prior pilot study work.
- Coding scheme included biological parent and patient questions regarding neurological, cardiovascular, cancer, injuries, sensory organ, respiratory, musculoskeletal, GI, infectious, pregnancy, substance abuse, and dental conditions.

**RESULTS**

**Reason for Referral**
- Behavior Problems (50.0%)
- School Related Problems (47.7%)
- Relationship Problems (54.2%)
- Family Problems (35.5%)
- Emotional Difficulties (86.9%)

**Psychiatric Issue**

**Neurological**
- Psychotic Thoughts + Behaviors
- Aggression
- Sexual Problems
- Hoarding Symptoms
- Dissociative Symptoms
- Self-Injurious Behavior
- Substance Abuse
- Legal Problems

**Respiratory**
- -
- -
- -
- -
- -
- -
- -

**Cardiovascular**
- Cancer
- Injuries

**Neurological, Respiratory, Cardiovascular, Cancer, Injuries**

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**DISCUSSION**

- This ethnically diverse group of foster youth referred for mental health treatment demonstrated a variety of mental health symptoms and health problems.
- Reported health problems in this sample of foster youth are similar to those occurring among low-income families.
- Referred youth experiencing psychotic thoughts and behaviors and/or aggression were more susceptible to neurological problems, while youth affected with hoarding symptoms reported more respiratory problems.
- Placement in foster care offers an opportunity to address all of the health care needs of this high-risk group of children; medical training programs should include education about common presenting mental and physical health problems of foster youth.
- Primary limitations of the current study include small sample size, potential bias of referrals, the lack of available medical records, and the use of a screening form designed for non-research purposes.
- Future research should explore the relationship between specific mental health symptoms and physical health problems and should compare referrer reports with medical records.

**CONTACT**

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Foster Care Status

Ethnicity
- African American
- White
- Hispanic
- American Indian
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Not Specified

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