

Fear of Covid-19 Keeps Emergencies Away

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As with SARS in 2003¹ hospital attendances have fallen during the Covid-19 pandemic, this has been attributed to both fear and accessibility^{2,3}. We describe a group of patients, referred by their general practitioner (GP) to the Emergency Department (ED) who did not attend because of fear of infection.

Our tertiary care ED has 70,000 attendances annually. Patients are referred by their GP, others walk in or arrive by ambulance. GPs usually give the patient a letter or use electronic referral, a new service, which began at the start of the pandemic.

Ireland went into lockdown from March 12th, 2020 and our ED attendances fell by 1,795 (33%) in the month of April. We noted ambulatory patients being referred electronically but not attending. From April 30th to May 25th, with hospital Ethics approval, we monitored this.

Seventy-one of 127 patients (55%) referred electronically did not attend. Of these, 58 (82%) were contactable by phone and agreed to a questionnaire survey.

Fifty-one (86%) of the patients said fear of Covid-19 infection was the primary reason for not attending. Other reasons included fear of dying without their family or fear of isolation (both misconceptions, as we do allow hospital visits) and also not wanting to burden the hospital.

Ten patients got better spontaneously, 48 (83%) sought further medical attention. None were aware of any serious on-going problems when phoned. The authors felt that ten patients had a potential threat to life, limb or sight based on the GP letter. One TIA may have been missed. Symptoms were mostly in the respiratory and gastrointestinal systems.

In conclusion, fear of Covid-19 and fear of isolation, led to ED non-attendance during lockdown. Our ED patient attendances figures have been back to normal since July. The improved attendance is likely due to better awareness of GP services and hospital pathways. We will soon see if ED attendances during the second wave of Covid-19 and the subsequent level 5 lockdown will be similar.

Ar scáth a cheile a mhaireann na daoine - sheltered by each other we survive.

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