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“A service in crisis” Survey reveals GPs concerns about mental health services for children and young people

- New survey of GPs from youth mental health charity stem4 finds that children and young people’s mental health services have deteriorated over the past six years
- 63% of GPs fear their young patients may come to harm through lack of access to treatment
- GPs told stem4: *“It is just getting worse and worse; CAMHS is unsafe; Literally no CAMHS services available; 2-year waiting list; Non-existent service unless florid psychosis or suicidal acts; It is an utter disgrace; Under-resourced, inadequate, and dangerous; I didn’t think it could get any worse, but mental health services in the UK are deteriorating; Patient needs to be actively suicidal to be seen”.*

Most GPs (95%) believe mental health services for children and young people are critically failing and have deteriorated over the past six years. This has triggered many to describe their local NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) as “dangerous” and “unsafe”, new research shows.

Young people who are anxious, depressed, or self-harming are now routinely being denied help. Even under-18s with an eating disorder or psychosis are being refused care by overstretched CAMHS services, which insist that they are not sick enough to warrant treatment.

Youth mental health charity stem4, which has been tracking GPs views of NHS, CAMHS for the past six years, today finds that most GPs would describe services as either in crisis (46%), or very inadequate (49%), compared to 85% in April 2016.

“CAMHS rejected a referral for anorexia, stating inadequate information when the BMI was clearly stated, and only 16!” **Commented a GP from the North West**

And with high levels of referrals rejected, and long waiting lists sometimes for up to two years, two thirds (63%) of GPs now fear their patients may come to harm, while one in five (18%) say a patient has attempted to or taken their own life due to lack of access to treatment over the past 12 months.

“I have had children with psychosis and severe self-harm outright rejected. I was recently told that only a written referral would be accepted for a child actively suicidal (stopped from jumping off a building earlier that day). The crisis team would not accept the patient for same day assessment. The only safe option was to direct to A&E for safety, which is not ideal or appropriate.” **Commented a GP from Wales**

“Services are resistant to take any referrals. example: 12-year-old found to have ligature in his room. Was told threshold for referral was not met as no marks on his neck.” **Added a GP from East of England**

Rationing treatment and care to only the most unwell, has created a dangerous and unsafe service.

In 2016, well before the pandemic, most (87%) GPs told stem4 they expected pressure on services to increase due to a steady rise in the numbers of young patients experiencing mental health difficulties, combined with years of underfunding. Yet despite £1.4 billion of extra investment made in children and young people’s mental health service between 2015 and 2021, none on the 1,000 GP’s surveyed say they’ve seen any increase in capacity. Instead, patient referrals are increasing, as services diminish.

“We have patients about whom the clinical team are very concerned to be told that they are on a waiting list about 15 months long.” **Commented a GP from London**

“There are literally no CAMHS services available.” *Referrals that do get accepted still have a 2-year waiting list.”* **Commented a GP from South West**

Half (53%) of GPs told the survey at least six in ten referrals for patients experiencing anxiety, depression, a conduct disorder, and who are self-harming are routinely rejected by CAMHS as their symptoms were not deemed severe enough, even though only the most at-risk are referred.

A quarter of GPs believe at least six in ten referrals for patients with eating disorders and addictions are rejected, and one ten say at least half of all referrals for patients with psychosis are denied access to treatment.

5% of GPs have stopped referring young patients all together, with a handful saying they have instead instructed patients to go to A&E, even though that is not appropriate.

Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, founder of stem4, comment on the survey said:

"Individuals with severe mental illness including bipolar disorder, severe and enduring depression, psychosis, PTSD, eating disorders will get worse the longer they have to wait for treatment."

"With young people there is often a critical window for treatment. Delay in treatment increases risk, and you can expect problems in application to study or work, relationship issues, and other emerging co-morbid mental health issues, for example, depression with increased vulnerability to self-harm, anxiety with panic attacks. It is also harder to engage young people in treatment the longer they have to wait since they often feel angry and let down, minimised or overlooked."

"It is truly shocking to learn from this survey of GPs' experiences of dealing with CAMHS services that so many vulnerable young people in desperate need of urgent help with their mental health are being forced to wait for so long -- up to two years -- for care they need immediately. As a clinician, it is particularly worrying that children and young people with psychosis, eating disorders and even those who have just tried to take their own life are condemned to such long waits. CAMHS needs to undergo a major expansion in order to meet the serious and growing mental health needs that young people under the age of 21 have."

As a consequence of these young patients unable to access the treatment they need to be well:

- Half (58%) GPs have witnessed patient's symptoms worsen and they have presented at hospital accidents and emergency (A&E).
- One in five (20%) GPs say medication has been explored or prescribed as a treatment option.
- Three out of four (74%) GPs say it has led to multiple presentations at the practice by the patient and family.
- GPs say the young person has been referred back to their school (47%), the local council (34%), or social services (19%), or entered the Youth Offender Services (6%).

Over half of GPs (54%) have now undertaken continuing professional development in mental health to try to help their young patients.

Dr Nihara Krause added:

"For the past six years Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services have been described as a ticking time bomb, the Cinderella service of the NHS, a postcode lottery, and the list goes on. Yet despite successive governments promises to improve mental health services for children and young people, with extra boosts of cash, including the additional £1.4bn investment made between 2015 and 2021, services have neither improved, nor been maintained. In fact, as these GP describe, CAMHS is not much more than a raffle, and one that is currently in crisis."

"Undoubtedly, many of today's greatest challenges are outside of this governments control. However, children and young people's mental health services are not. GPs are at the forefront of addressing this current crisis and they need and deserve our support, and services to which they can refer. Isn't it time we

invested in the future of our young people and give them the access to the mental health service they need and deserve?

Prof Martin Marshall, the chair of the Royal College of GPs, commenting on the survey, told The Guardian, *“These findings are both distressing and concerning.” He added: “It’s of paramount importance that if GPs refer these patients to specialist mental health services that these referrals are taken seriously and not dismissed without good reason.”*

Downloads of stem4’s NHS-approved mental health app Calm Harm to manage the urge to self-harm had doubled in the past three months compared to the same period in 2021. While just 40% of young people using the app are receiving any sort of treatment.

stem4’s own operational evidence supports the findings of this GP survey; that young people experiencing mental health difficulties are finding it hard to access effective mental health treatments.

Since the start of the pandemic, over 800,000 young people have downloaded and used stem4’s evidence-based and NHS-approved mobile phone apps as they seek to overcome their urge to self-harm and to deal with anxiety and depression. Over the past three months stem4 has recorded a 30% increase across in the number British young people downloading and accessing all of its apps:

- **Clear Fear**, which uses the evidence-based treatment Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to help manage the symptoms of anxiety;
- **Calm Harm**, which uses the basic principles of an evidence-based therapy, Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to help manage the urge to self-harm;
- **Move Mood**, which uses Behavioural Activation Therapy to help improve low mood and manage the symptoms of depression.
- **Combined Minds**, which uses a Strengths-Based approach that has been shown to be effective in recovery, providing practical strategies for families and friends to support teenage mental health;

- Ends -

Notes to editors

Contact

For queries or interview / case study requests/regional breakdown across the UK, contact:

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About the survey

Survey of 1,001 regionally representative GPs across the UK carried out by MedeConnect Healthcare Insight between 4 March and 1 April 2022.

Survey of 300 GP’s across the UK, A Time Bomb Waiting to Explode, May 2016 <https://stem4.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/A-Time-Bomb-Waiting-to-Explode.pdf>. Last accessed 18.12.18

Comments from the doctors surveyed included:

- *“It is so appalling in our area - it may as well not exist. Patients only get support if their parents can afford to pay for it, or they are drinking bleach.... even then its touch and go whether a referral to CAMHS will be accepted.” GP Yorkshire & Humber*
- *“CAMHS suggestion for a depressed and unwell teen with self-harm behaviours rejected by service recently include GP to consider starting an SSRI which flies against all NICE guidance and risk management.” GP North West*

- *“Wait times are so long that children are tending to either present at A&E following overdose, or self-harm. I am seeing some young people for 45 minutes every 2 weeks to discuss their issues and try to hold them until they get help.” GP South West*
- *“It is a battle to get anyone seen. CAMHS ask us to refer to schools and online self-help. School advises chase the GP. Parents and young people are caught in the middle. It is terrible. CAMHS needs investment. GPs cannot hold the fort with current under investment and understaffing.” GP South East*
- *“It is terrible, and I tell patients who have not tried to commit suicide that there is no point in referral and to contact the school for extra support.” GP London*
- *“Needs a complete overhaul. You can’t raise awareness of the importance of recognizing and treating mental health without a robust plan in place- totally inadequate services especially for eating disorders.” GP West Midlands*
- *“Woefully underfunded and understaffed, not fit for purpose. A disgrace for a first world country.” GP North East*
- *“Diabolical, if patients do get assessed it is by a non-prescriber who writes an essay with the concluding paragraph “to be managed by GP”. Total waste of taxpayers’ money.” GP East of England*
- *In northern it’s an atrocious service. Our MHP in practice are amazing and reduce CAMHS referrals by >30% a year. Don’t know what CAMHS actually do! Terrible.” GP Northern Ireland*
- *“Mostly CAMHS tell GPs in the area to contact the school or charity services. Not sure that they are aware that generally the patients and their parents have already done so, and therefore feel they are getting nowhere!” GP Wales*
- *“Wholly inadequate, no link with the rest of the service, poor transfer between child and adult services and a daily ongoing risk for patients.” GP Scotland*

About stem4

stem4 is an award-winning charity that supports teenagers with their mental health. It provides evidence-based education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change, and provides signposts to ensure early intervention and action. stem4 focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm and addiction.

The charity works with students, parents and teachers in secondary schools and colleges, and with health professionals such as GPs and school nurses through its conference programme and through digitally delivered workshops suitable for PHSE in schools. **stem4** is also included in the Royal College of GP toolkit.

■ stem4’s free, evidence-based, smartphone apps

With children and young people experiencing difficulty and long waiting times in accessing effective treatments, **stem4** has developed four NHS-approved smartphone apps, all based on evidence-based strategies, to help young people in the treatment of and recovery from their mental health difficulties. These apps have been downloaded and used over 2 million times.

www.stem4.org.uk

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