Mental Health Problems in the Offices of General Practitioners and Internists

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Introduction: Methods and Data

The data presented constitute the first results of a survey among ambulatory care physicians in the Federal Republic of Germany (EVaS). The study was based on a sample of 969 ambulatory care physicians of almost every specialty. This physician group represents a 10% sample of doctors in an area representative of the Federal Republic of Germany with respect to variables such as distribution of physicians by specialty, population distribution by age and sex, and health insurance status. The response rate was 62%. The survey was conducted in the last 3 months of 1981 and the first 3 months of 1982. Analyses are based on office contacts by ambulatory care patients selected at random by physicians. The reporting period for physicians was 2 days.

The survey's main aim was to provide information on contacts by ambulatory care patients with their physicians or their offices by patient characteristics, reasons for contact, severity of morbidity as evaluated by patient and physician, services provided and disposition. Reasons for visit as indicated by patient and diagnoses assigned to the principal reason by the physician were coded with the Reason for Visit Classification, developed by the National Center of Health Statistics [3]. This classification scheme was transcribed into German [2] and substantially extended in the course of coding the data for this study.

Results

Contacts with General Practitioners and Internists by Patient Characteristics

This paper presents results about mental health-related patient contacts with general practitioners and internists.

The majority of contacts with general practitioners' offices are made by women (Fig. 1a). Out of 100 patient-physician contacts, 56 are by females and 44 by males. This discrepancy is even wider for internists. For this physician group we observe 61% of contacts by females and 39% of contacts by males (Fig. 1b). As expected, Fig. 1 shows that contact percentages for older persons
are higher than for the younger age groups. In particular, the contacts with persons beyond the age of 44 years of age are higher for internists (68.4% of total contacts) than for general practitioners (60.1% of total contacts). Furthermore, we observe great differences of contact percentages by health insurance status. While about 4% of contacts with general practitioners are by privately insured patients, this figure is about 8% for internists.

Fig. 1. a Contacts (in %) with general practitioners by sex and age. b Contacts (in %) with internists by sex and age