Guidance clarifying EIP and ARMS referral criteria

Introduction

The recent Access and Waiting Times Standard\(^1\) will lead to a number of changes in the functions of Early Intervention in Psychosis (EIP) Services in the UK, and to the group of service users who can be referred to these services. This document aims to clarify the new criteria for referral, and is intended to update previous guidance\(^2\). The Access and Waiting Times Standard applies to referrals in which the referrer has either detected, or suspects a possible first episode of psychosis, and makes an urgent or emergency referral, which is flagged as “suspected First Episode Psychosis”.

Service user views

Young people would like to be informed at referral that they can expect to be seen within two weeks. Telephone contact is preferred, so it is vitally important that correct contact details are given with any referral.

First episode psychosis

Psychotic illnesses are a major cause of disability in young people. EIP services have been developed worldwide to improve outcomes for people experiencing these conditions, by improving access to treatment, and by delivering best-practice, evidence based care.

EIP services will now provide care to all people between the ages of 14 and 65 who are experiencing a first episode of non-organic psychosis (FEP). This includes first episodes of schizophreniform, manic and depressive psychoses, puerperal psychoses and acute and transient psychoses amongst others. Although these conditions usually develop in adolescence and young adulthood, some may develop later, particularly in women, and the changes in age range reflect this. EIP teams will not provide care for people experiencing organic psychoses, e.g. psychosis in the context of dementia.

Diagnostic uncertainty

Diagnoses in FEP are often unstable and polymorphic, particularly in the early stages, so acceptance by EIP teams is usually determined by the presence of significant psychotic symptoms. These include hallucinations, delusions, conceptual disorganisation and others, which should be of sufficient severity to cause distress or impairment of social or occupational function.
The use of standardised assessments (eg PANSS\(^3\), CAARMS\(^4\)) to measure symptom severity and response to treatment is recommended. An item score of 4 or higher on the PANSS Positive items of hallucinations or delusions, or scoring 5 or above in the context of a cluster of symptoms, is indicative that a person has reached the threshold to be accepted by an EIP service. Additionally, the symptom must have lasted throughout the day for several days or have occurred several times a week, not limited to a few brief moments, and the above symptoms must be present for a period of over seven consecutive days duration over the last 12 months (or, if less than this, then the improvement must be attributable to antipsychotic treatment). Negative symptoms, however, are the strongest predictors of poor outcome\(^5\). Use of standardised and validated diagnostic assessments, for example, the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM IV (SCID)\(^6\) or Diagnostic interview for Psychoses, Diagnostic Module (DIP-DM)\(^7\) is recommended to clarify diagnostic uncertainty. Some people, in whom symptoms are suggestive of possible psychosis, may benefit from an extended assessment (usually for 4-6 months) to clarify whether they meet the criteria for FEP or At Risk Mental State (ARMS), or neither of these.

Comorbidities are extremely common, and should not preclude care from EIP services. If psychosis is not the primary problem that needs care, EIP teams may feel that it is appropriate to refer to another, more appropriate service, for example, drug and alcohol, autism, mother and baby or personality disorders services. In such cases, the EIP team should be able to remain involved to deliver interventions as necessary and appropriate.

**Duration of treatment**

EIP teams usually provide care for three years, to ensure that service users receive best practice treatment over the “critical period”\(^8\). On occasions, people may need longer care to achieve a stable personal recovery, while some people may make good progress earlier and feel that they no longer wish to be involved with services. On-going monitoring and contact with services, which may be of low intensity, are recommended for three years for all first episode psychoses, and early discharge should be for a small minority.

**Acceptance criteria**

First presentation of psychosis

Age 14-65

Not previously in receipt of a full three years of EIP treatment

Psychotic symptoms (hallucinations, delusions, catatonia, thought disorder present for one week and causing distress or impairment of function).

If psychosis is suspected, but does not meet the above criteria, assessment for an At Risk Mental State, using a validated ARMS assessment instrument, eg the CAARMS, or the Structured Interview for Prodromal Symptoms (SIPS) SOPS, is recommended\(^9\)\(^10\)\(^11\).
At Risk Mental States (ARMS)

In addition to providing care for people experiencing first episodes of psychosis, EIP teams should have the capacity to assess and treat those deemed to be at-risk of developing psychosis. Teams should have dedicated ARMS workers, who provide assessment and treatment for people who may be experiencing prodromal symptoms, and have a high risk of developing a psychosis in the near future. The aim of working with this group is to reduce the number of people making the transition, and developing psychotic illnesses.

Psychotic illnesses appear to develop over variable timescales. Some have a long, insidious onset, whilst others may develop acutely. Identification of prodromal states and intervention in prodromal phases may improve outcomes. At Risk Mental State assessments provide screening to detect people felt to be at higher risk of developing psychotic illnesses, and who may benefit from treatment. The most appropriate follow up period appears to be 3 years, with transitions rates of around 36% occurring up to this point.

CBT interventions in young people experiencing an At Risk Mental State have been shown to reduce symptom severity and, in some studies, to reduce the number of people going on to develop psychotic illnesses. A recent meta-analysis concluded that CBT informed treatment is associated with a reduced risk of transition to psychosis at 6, 12 and 18-24 months and reduced symptoms at 12 months. If people develop a full psychotic illness, they will be in contact with services and should receive prompt treatment, which will reduce the Duration of Untreated Psychosis (DUP), a factor influencing outcomes.

As these services are intended to reduce future morbidity, they should aim to see people who do not meet criteria for a first episode psychosis, yet show features which are predictive of risk of development of an episode of FEP.

These include:

- Distress
- Young adulthood/adolescence (age 14-30),
- Recent (over past year) decline in social function

Plus:

- Attenuated psychotic symptoms or
- Transient psychotic symptoms or
- Strong family history of psychotic illness or
- Increasing unexplained distress or agitation or
- Other risk indicators, eg schizotypal personality

Assessment

EIP services will be expected to provide assessment for all people aged 14-65 with At Risk Mental States. Standardised, validated instruments, such as the Comprehensive
Assessment of At Risk Mental States (CAARMS), or the Structured Interview for Prodromal Symptoms (SIPS) SOPS will be used in the assessment. Those who are identified as being in the Ultra-High Risk (UHR) group will receive a CBT-based intervention for ARMS\textsuperscript{14}. Use of a checklist in primary care may be valuable in identifying people who should be referred for ARMS assessment\textsuperscript{15}.

Evidence for the effectiveness of specialist ARMS interventions has been generated in younger adult populations (<30) so there is no current evidence that this approach will work with the over 35 age group that EI teams are now required to work with. Although providing ARMS interventions to this older age group is likely to be beneficial, and would not be considered a risk for harm, where EIP service capacity is limited it may be necessary to refer people over the age of 30 presenting with ARMS onwards to appropriate specialist Mental Health services, especially where other comorbidities make it clinically appropriate.

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