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117.2. Mental Health Triage Assessment: Medico-legal Issues and other Challenges

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In many Western countries, the primary interface between the community and mental health services is the telephone. Mental health triage services provide psychiatric assessment to large population groups in both rural and metropolitan regions. This paper reports on doctoral research that involved a statewide investigation of mental health triage in Victoria, Australia. The aim of the study was to further understand the scope of mental health triage practice, and shed light on some of the issues and challenges facing the discipline. A 33 item survey was distributed to clinicians across each of the 21 Area Mental Health services in Victoria, Australia. The response rate to the survey was 70 percent (n=135). Follow up interviews were conducted on 15% of the sample. The results of the study indicate that mental health triage is still in its infancy in terms of defining and articulating practice. There are many aspects of MH triage that pose legal and ethical challenges, such as the practice of conducting Mental Status Examination via the telephone, and the difficulty of accurately predicting risk. As a new area of practice, mental health triage lacks clear theoretical and practical definition. Further research needs to be conducted to establish clear legal and practice parameters to ensure safe, equitable service delivery.