Factors Influencing the Categorisation of Urgency in Mental Health Triage

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Background: Mental health triage (MHT) is the first point of contact with mental health services for all potential consumers, or people seeking assistance on behalf of a person
thought to have a mental illness. MHT services operate seven days a week, 24 hours a day across Australia to provide assessment, support, and referral for people experiencing mental health problems. The key role functions of triage include initial mental health screening assessment to determine whether the person has a mental health related problem, the urgency of the presentation, and the most appropriate service response. Categorising the urgency of mental health presentations is complex, especially in telephone only assessment, yet accurate assessment is crucial to ensuring that the service-user receives timely, appropriate care commensurate with their clinical need. **Aim:** The aim of this presentation is to raise discussion on the factors influencing the categorisation of urgency in regional MHT. The presentation draws on findings of a Program Evaluation of a regional MHT service which involved an analysis of 875 occasions of triage, and consultation with 6 emergency departments, the MHT staff, and intake staff of Child and Adolescent MHS, Aged Persons MHS, and Adult MHS. **Methods:** Program Evaluation methodology using mixed method design. **Results:** The categorisation of urgency in MHT is influenced by multiple competing demands which impact on the clinician’s decision-making. The unique challenges associated with afterhours MHT service provision in regional and rural areas further complicates what is already a demanding and highly complex clinical task.