Profile of Patients Signing Against Medical Advice

James P. Long, MD, and Anibal Marin, MD
Yonkers, New York

The hospital patient who signs against medical advice has been the subject of few studies. This study was undertaken to determine if there are any trends evident in who signs against medical advice, when someone signs, and for what reasons.

Methods

This study was performed at St. Joseph's Medical Center, Yonkers, New York, a 185-bed general community hospital in the center of the city. The medical center contains the inpatient services of medicine, surgery, pediatrics, psychiatry, and medical and surgical intensive care units. The medical center also has a residency program in family practice.

The study period covered 12 months from July 1, 1978, to June 30, 1979, during which time there were 4,468 hospital admissions. Information on discharges that were against medical advice was obtained from a log book maintained by the Medical Records Department. During this period there were 134 such discharges. One hundred twenty-eight charts were found and analyzed. All the charts were reviewed by the same investigator.

The following data were collected: the age and sex of the patient signing against medical advice, the hospital service to which the patient was admitted, the patient's residence, the length of stay up to the time of discharge against medical advice, the time of day the patient was admitted and discharged, whether the patient had previously been admitted to the hospital and, if so, whether the patient had previously been discharged against medical advice, the patient's final diagnosis, the apparent physical condition on discharge, and the reason for signing out, if any, listed on the chart.

Results

Of all the age groups studied, the 21- to 30-year-old age group signed out against medical advice most frequently. The next largest group comprised the 31- to 40-year-old patients. Interestingly, 3 percent of the patients who signed out were 0 to 10 years of age and 2 percent were 81 to 90 years of age.

Of the 128 patients who were discharged against medical advice, male patients represented 61.7 percent of discharges while accounting for 50.9 percent of hospital admissions.

During the study period, 52.3 percent of the patients examined were admitted to the medical service and 29.7 percent were admitted to the psychiatry service. For this period, medicine and psychiatry accounted for 45.7 percent and 9.5 percent of all admissions, respectively.

Yonkers was the home address listed by 82 percent of people signing out against medical advice, whereas 10.9 percent came from adjacent New York City. Only 0.8 percent listed no residence.

The majority (52 percent) were in the medical center for less than 24 hours before signing out. The emergency room accounted for 78.9 percent of those admitted who signed out, with 21.1 percent of admissions being direct admissions.

No reason was given by patients for signing out against medical advice 64.8 percent of the time.

From the Family Practice Residency Program, St. Joseph's Medical Center, Yonkers, New York. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. James P. Long, Medical Associates of Beloit, Beloit, WI 53511.

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When reasons were given (in 40 percent of cases), the patient was upset over the treatment being received or the management of the case.

From the information gathered, 82.8 percent of patients signing out against medical advice appeared to be in no apparent physical danger at the time of leaving. Seven percent of the cases indicated possible acute dangers (eg, preoperative medication previously administered, abnormal lung scan, unsteady on feet).

Almost one fourth (24.7 percent) of those who signed the hospital's discharge form against medical advice had a psychiatric diagnosis. The use and abuse of alcohol or drugs accounted for 17.3 percent and 9.3 percent of discharge diagnoses, respectively.

Comment

The incidence of patients discharging themselves from a hospital against medical advice has ranged from 0.7 percent to 21 percent in several studies.[1-4] The lowest incidence was found in the university general hospital, and the highest, in an open psychiatric inpatient service. In this study the rate of signing out against medical advice was 3.0 percent of the total population discharged and involved a disproportionate number of men.

On the basis of this study, the person who is at the greatest risk of signing out against medical advice is a young adult man who is admitted through the emergency room between noon and mid evening. He has a diagnosis of a psychiatric problem or one relating to the use of drugs or alcohol. He is admitted to the psychiatry service and leaves within the first day. Most likely, if he has left against medical advice once, he will sign out against medical advice again.

References

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