

Mental health inequalities in detection of breast cancer

December 1 2014

Women with a mental illness (including depression, anxiety and serious mental illnesses) are less likely to be screened for breast cancer, according to new research published in the *BJPsych* (online first).

The research was led by Dr Alex J Mitchell, consultant psychiatrist in the Department of Cancer Studies, University of Leicester.

Studies have previously shown there is a higher mortality rate due to cancer in people with mental illness, perhaps because of high rates of risk factors such as smoking. In addition, it appears cancer is often detected later in those with mental illness. Previous research has shown that people with mental illness receive suboptimal medical care. An important question is whether women with a mental illness are less likely to be screened for breast cancer than those who do not have [mental health issues](#). Could the diagnosis of a mental health condition prejudice receipt of a [screening mammogram](#)?

To find out more, UK-based researchers from the Universities of Leicester and Greenwich reviewed 24 publications reporting [breast cancer](#) screening practices in women with mental illness (around 700,000), and five studies investigating screening for those in distress but who had not been diagnosed with a mental illness (nearly 21,500).

Researchers found that there were significantly reduced rates of mammography screening in women with mental illness, depression and severe mental illness such as schizophrenia. The effect was not present

in women with distress alone, suggesting distress was not the explanation.

Dr Mitchell said: "We have previously shown that there are inequalities in medical care for people who happen to have a mental health diagnosis. This is partly explained by poorer attendance but also partly explained by willingness of staff to treat a patient's medical condition at the same time as a mental health condition. In this study we found that [mental ill health](#) was linked with 45,000 missed screens which potentially could account for 90 avoidable deaths per annum in the UK alone. Clearly patients with mental illness should receive care that is at least comparable with care given to the general population. Every effort should be made to educate and support [women](#) with mental illness called for screening."

Provided by University of Leicester

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