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Postnatal depression in Australian general practice

The BEACH program, a continuous national study of general practice activity in Australia, gives us an overview of encounters at which postnatal depression was managed. This provides a backdrop against which the articles in this issue of *Australian Family Physician* can be further considered.

Postnatal depression was managed in BEACH 411 times between April 1998 and March 2005, at a rate of 10 per 1000 encounters with female patients (Figure 1). This represents an average of approximately 60 000 encounters at which postnatal depression is managed in general practice across Australia in any 1 year.

Age of patients

Four-fifths of encounters where postnatal depression was managed (referred to here as postnatal depression encounters) were with women aged 25–44 years and almost one-fifth with women aged 15–24 years. Only four patients were aged 45–64 years. The age specific rate was 0.2 per 100 encounters with female patients aged 15–24 years and 0.3 with those aged 25–44 years.

Reasons for encounter

Depression was the reason for encounter most often cited by patients (60 per 100 of these encounters). The need for a postnatal check up was recorded at 7 per 100 and weakness/tiredness at 6 per 100 postnatal depression encounters. Psychological follow up, prescription, and acute stress reaction were other common reasons for encounter.

Other problems managed

Contraception was the most common other problem managed, at a rate of 6 per 100 postnatal depression encounters. Postnatal check and female genital check also occurred in conjunction with postnatal depression management, each at a rate of 3 per 100 of these encounters.

Medications

The number of medications prescribed/advised/supplied was 57 per 100 postnatal depression problems, compared with 70 per 100 total problems managed in BEACH. Sertraline was prescribed at a rate of 22 per 100 of these problems, citalopram at 7 per 100, and paroxetine at a rate of 5 per 100 postnatal depression problems managed.

Other treatments

General practitioners relied heavily on other treatments in the management of postnatal depression. They recorded these at a rate of 66 per 100 problems, almost double the average rate for BEACH (34 per 100). The most common of these treatments was counselling, provided at a rate of 57 per 100 postnatal depression problems managed.

Referrals

The average referral rate for BEACH is 8 per 100 problems managed. Patients with postnatal depression were referred at a rate of 15 per 100 problems. Referrals were made most frequently to psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors.

Pathology and imaging orders

The pathology ordering rate was 14 per 100 postnatal depression problems, significantly lower than the BEACH average of 24 per 100. Full blood count was most commonly ordered at a rate of 4 per 100 of these problems. There was only one imaging order for this problem.

Conflict of interest: none.

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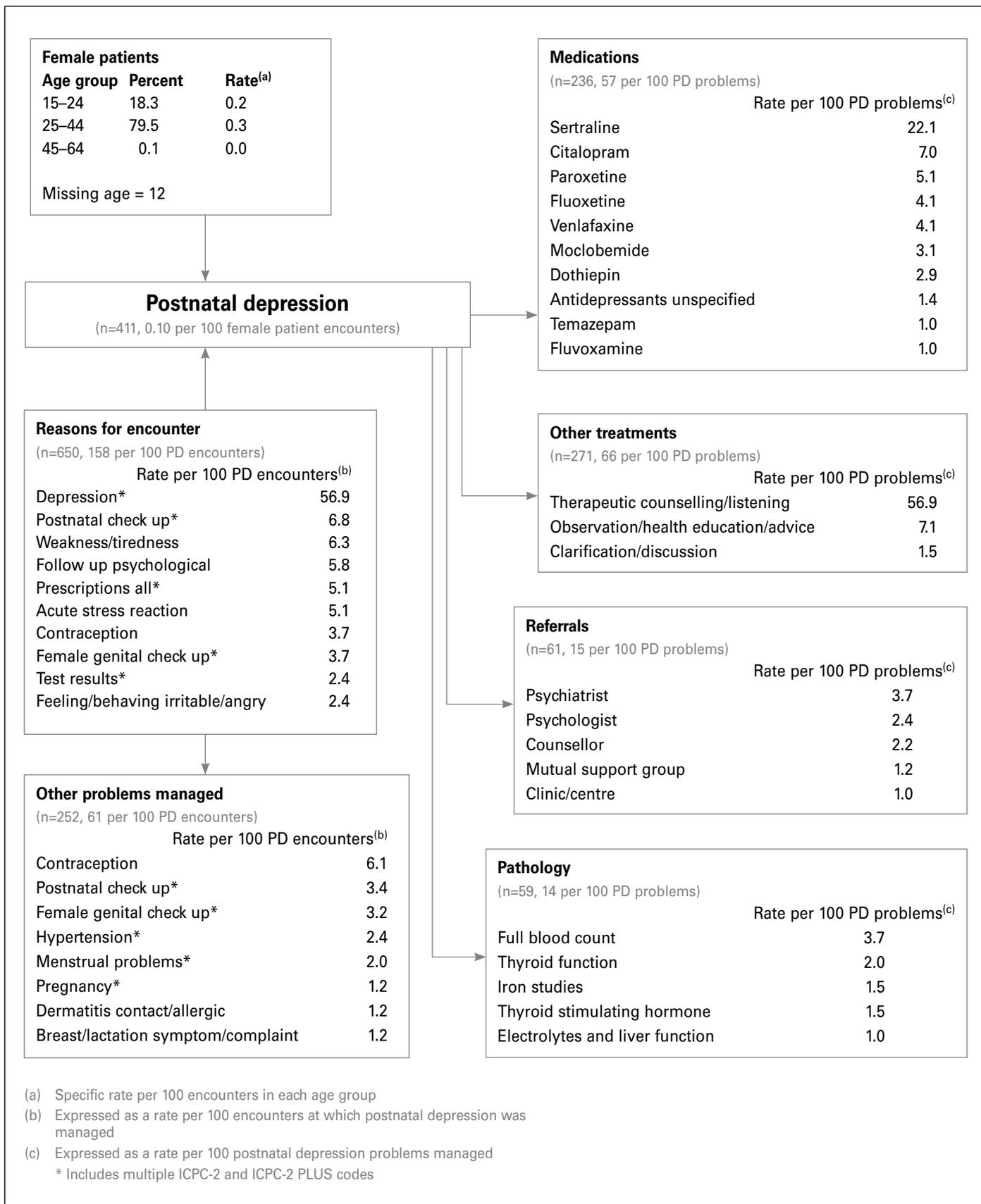


Figure 1. Content of encounters at which postnatal depression was managed