

Where did you go? A naturalistic mixed methods follow-up study of people who attended emergency departments with mental health problems but do not wait.

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Background: Although around 4% of people are expected to leave the emergency department before the completion of assessment and treatment (“failed to wait”), little is known of people who attend the emergency department with mental health issues who leave early.

Objectives: This study aimed to understand why people who attend emergency departments with mental health problems leave early and what care was subsequently received.

Methods: Participants were identified using local emergency department attendance lists and contacted to participate in a telephone survey during 2021. Data were analysed using a mixed methods methodology.

Findings: Of 106 eligible persons, 42 (40%) agreed to participate.

Why people attended ED: At initial presentation, 21% of participants had made a suicide attempt; 40% were experiencing ongoing suicidal ideation.

Why did people leave early: People who left early often did so as a result of the long wait times (31%). However, the wait time was contextualized within the manner of waiting, including negative attitudes of staff, poor communication, an unwelcoming environment, a sense of being unimportant and potentially dismissed as well as problems with the person’s internal state and discomfort.

What subsequent care was received? Half of people who left early did not seek mental health treatment elsewhere and one third of people reported that their emergency department visit made them feel worse.

Limitations: small sample size, non-random sampling, limited clinical documentation.

Conclusion: People who leave early from the emergency department report leaving because of long wait times in difficult conditions and are at risk of seeking no follow-up care.

Conflicts of interest: *No conflicts of interest declared*