Identifying patient-level health and social care costs for older adults discharged from acute medical units in England

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Abstract

Background: acute medical units allow for those who need admission to be correctly identified, and for those who could be managed in ambulatory settings to be discharged. However, re-admission rates for older people following discharge from acute medical units are high and may be associated with substantial health and social care costs.

Objective: identifying patient-level health and social care costs for older people discharged from acute medical units in England.

Design: a prospective cohort study of health and social care resource use.

Setting: an acute medical unit in Nottingham, England.

Participants: four hundred and fifty-six people aged over 70 who were discharged from an acute medical unit within 72 h of admission.

Methods: hospitalisation and social care data were collected for 3 months post-recruitment. In Nottingham, further approvals were gained to obtain data from general practices, ambulance services, intermediate care and mental healthcare. Resource use was combined with national unit costs.

Results: costs from all sectors were available for 250 participants. The mean (95% CI, median, range) total cost was £1926 (1579–2383, 659, 0–23,612). Contribution was: secondary care (76.1%), primary care (10.9%), ambulance service (0.7%), intermediate care (0.2%), mental healthcare (2.1%) and social care (10.0%). The costliest 10% of participants accounted for 50% of the cost.

Conclusions: this study highlights the costs accrued by older people discharged from acute medical units (AMUs): they are mainly (76%) in secondary care and half of all costs were incurred by a minority of participants (10%).

Keywords: economic evaluation, acute medical unit, costing methodology, primary care, secondary care, social care

Introduction

Over the last 15 years, the English National Health Service (NHS) has reconfigured acute care; a key innovation has been the introduction of acute medical units (AMUs), now present in 98% of hospitals [1]. The number of vulnerable older people presenting in crisis to AMUs is rising [2]. Service evaluations indicate that re-admission rates for older people in the year following discharge from AMUs are high (27%) [3, 4]. These poor outcomes may be associated with high resource use, which could help justify spending on interventions to improve outcomes. However, the true health and social care costs of this care have rarely been described at all, or appropriately [5].

This study describes health and social care costs incurred over 3 months by older people post-AMU discharge.
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Method

Participants

The Acute Medicine Outcome Study (AMOS) was a two-centre (Nottingham and Leicester) cohort study which aimed to recruit 700 participants. Older people (70 years or older) that had attended and then discharged from an AMU within 72 h were included in this study. The characteristics and outcomes of this population are reported elsewhere [3].

Source of costing data

Resource use data can be collected alongside clinical studies to inform estimates of costs of care. Despite clear recommendations [6], only half of published studies measure costs other than secondary care, even fewer include social care costs. Various methods exist to collect resource use information including questionnaires, diaries, and electronic record searches; however, respondents dislike keeping diaries [7] and people with lower educational attainment under-report in diaries [8], as might those with cognitive impairment—common in the population of interest described here. Electronic administrative record (EAR) systems to record patient health and social care are now common, and this information can be used to derive patient costs.

EAR systems were interrogated across a range of health and social care services. Hospitalisation and social care data were collected retrospectively for 644 patients in Leicester and Nottingham for 3 months post-AMU discharge (January 09–February 11). In the 456 participants (in Nottingham), further approvals were gained to obtain data from general practices, ambulance services, intermediate and mental healthcare. All data were anonymised at the service. Resource use was combined with national unit costs to derive total patient costs. Extensive fieldwork was completed with the included agencies to derive parameters covering resource use (Table 1).

Secondary care

Secondary care data (day-case, inpatient, outpatient and intensive care) were obtained from two patient administration systems (PAS) covering five hospitals in Nottingham. In Leicester, the secondary uses service (SUS) data set was interrogated. The same parameters were available and obtained from PAS and SUS data sets. Unit costs were attached using NHS Reference Costs for 2009/10 [10].

Table 1. Summary of resource use parameters obtained in this study (see Supplementary data Webappendix 1 available in Age and Ageing online for further detail)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Service parameter/code</th>
<th>Resource use source</th>
<th>Unit cost source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient and day-case</td>
<td>Start of episode (date), end of episode (date), episode number, spell number, primary diagnosis (ICD-10 code and description), co-morbidities (ICD-10 code and description), procedures (OPCS-4 code and description), HRG-4 code, source of admission, method of admission, specialty on admission, method of discharge, destination of discharge, site code</td>
<td>Patient Administration System (PAS); Secondary Uses Service (SUS) data set</td>
<td>NHS reference costs 2009/10 (using HRG-4 codes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient care</td>
<td>Start of episode (date), end of episode (date), type of visit, location, description, Treatment Function Code (TFC), TFC description, attendance status</td>
<td>Patient Administration System (PAS)</td>
<td>NHS reference costs 2009/10 (Using TFCs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive care</td>
<td>Start of episode (date), end of episode (date), level of care</td>
<td>Patient Administration System (PAS)</td>
<td>NHS reference costs 2009/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary care</td>
<td>Type of events</td>
<td>Consultations, procedures, telephone calls, home visits, administrative tasks, tests ordered and test results received</td>
<td>GP EHR's system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event details</td>
<td>Date of event, place of event, type of event, provider, free-text</td>
<td>GP EHR's system</td>
<td>PSSRU 2010 NHS wage schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication and wound dressings</td>
<td>Date of issue, rubric (name of drug), dosage, preparation, acute/repeat use</td>
<td>GP EHR's system</td>
<td>BNF 2011 C&amp;D 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulance service</td>
<td>Date and time of event, call stop reason, call sign, resource type, hospital attended, clinic/ward attended by resource, primary complaint, dispatch code, government standard at time of call, time from call until arrival on scene, time at scene</td>
<td>Caller Aided Dispatch (CAD) system, Patient Record Forms (PRF's)</td>
<td>NHS reference costs 2009/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate care</td>
<td>Date and time of referral, location, reason for referral, service offered, activity, activity description, activity length (minutes), specialist, care plan category, care plan sub-category, consultation method, date of discharge, location after discharge, discharge reason</td>
<td>TPP SystmOne</td>
<td>PSSRU 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health care</td>
<td>Activity date, activity type, activity code, specialty code, Team/Ward type</td>
<td>CSE Healthcare RoI</td>
<td>NHS reference costs 2009/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social care</td>
<td>Start date, end date, category of contact, service description, reason for referral, outcome of assessment, source</td>
<td>OLM Care First (City) Corelogic Frameworks (County)</td>
<td>PSSRU 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If unit costs were sourced from a reference pre-2010 then these costs were standardised to 2010 prices using the Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS) index [9] for annual price inflation in the NHS.*
Primary care

Primary care resource use data were obtained from Nottingham GP practice EAR systems. Of 118 GP practices serving our cohort, data were obtained from 48 practices (250/456 participants): seventeen practices external to Nottinghamshire were excluded (44/456 participants); three practices (19/456 participants) declined; 50 practices (147/456 participants) did not respond to (a minimum of) three emails, letters or telephone calls during practice recruitment; three participants could not be identified on the practices’ EAR system. Data were collected from five different EAR systems: EMIS IV, 119 patients (47.6%); SystmOne, 104 (41.6%), Synergy, 22 (8.8%), EMIS PCS, 4 (1.6%) and Vision, 1 (0.4%). Unit costs were applied based on time taken to perform each task using time assumptions obtained from PSSRU 2009/10 [11], empirical literature, or expert opinion, and mid-point yearly salary estimations taken from the NHS ‘Agenda for Change’ pay rates [12]. The protocol for obtaining primary care data is included in Supplementary data Webappendix 3 available in Age and Ageing online.

Other healthcare

Nottingham patient-specific ambulance service resource use was obtained from the Caller Aided Despatch (CAD) IT service team, which was cross-referenced with paper-based patient record forms (PRFs) to identify study participants.

Two types of intermediate care (physical and mental health), within two different catchment areas, were identified in Nottingham. Three of the organisations used SystmOne, allowing sharing of data via the ‘Spine’ [13].

In Nottingham, a mental healthcare trust provided data via the RIO system [14].

Social care

Social care services within two different catchment areas, with two different electronic systems, were identified within Nottingham. Services consisted of contacts and assessments, and care plans.

Cost analysis

Unit costs were combined with resource use to generate patient-level costs. The total costs from all services, were estimated where possible, for all patients who remained in the study for 90 days without withdrawal (patients who died during the study were not classified as ‘withdrawn’). Analysis was undertaken using STATA version 11.

Research ethics committee and regulatory approvals were obtained [Southampton and South West Hampshire Research Ethics Committee (A) reference number: 08/H0502/139].

Results

From 1,680 eligible patients, 667 participants were recruited into the AMOS study; reasons for not being recruited included: 409 (24%), lack of mental capacity and no consultant; 459 (27%), declined to be recruited; 93 (6%), insufficient English; 50 (3%) AMU staff advised not appropriate; two participants withdrew soon-after recruitment. Four hundred and seventy-one participants were recruited in Nottingham (71%) and 196 from Leicester (29%). At 90 days, 34 (5.3%) participants had died and 6 (0.9%) of the 633 surviving participants had moved to a care home. The recruitment and flow of participants in this cohort study has previously been reported [3]. Of 667 recruited participants, 23 withdrew from having their resource use analysed. Of 644 participants, 57% were female, the mean (range) age was 80 (70–101) and 95% were alive at the end of the 3-month period. The final cohort consisted of 644 participants from Nottingham (456) and Leicester (188). We report the resource use and costs of the 456 Nottingham patients with secondary and social care costs, and the subset of 250 of these patients with total costs including primary care (Table 2). The results for Leicester are reported in Supplementary data Webappendix 4 available in Age and Ageing online.

The mean (95% CI, median, range) total cost for 250 Nottingham patients with complete data was £1,926 (1,579–2,383, 659, 0–23,612). The mean and median reflect the highly right-skewed distribution of these costs, indicating non-normality, very typical in this type of data. Three month readmission rate was 27%, the same as for the whole cohort. Secondary care costs were the main cost driver, constituting 76.2% of costs. Contribution from other sectors was: primary care (10.9%), ambulance service (0.7%), intermediate care (0.2%), mental healthcare (2.1%) and social care (10.0%). The costliest 10% of patients accounted for 50% of the overall cost of the cohort.

Discussion

The mean total cost per older patient discharged from an AMU over 3 months was £1,926, but the costliest 10% of patients accounting for 50% of overall costs. Secondary care was the main cost driver, constituting three quarters of costs, with primary and social care as other main contributors (11 and 10%, respectively).

A limitation of these results is that they may not be completely representative of older patients discharged from AMUs, partially due to patients excluded from AMOS, and partially due to limited access to primary care data. A further limitation of this method was quality of resource use and unit cost parameters collected.

The key strength of this study is the use of electronic administration records rather than unreliable methods such as self-reported service use, allowing capture of better approximation of the true health and social care costs for this cohort.

Although this group of patients has not been studied in this way before, other studies of frail older people living at home [15–17] have also shown that the majority of the costs they incur are in secondary care. From our results, it follows
that the most appropriate target for cost reduction in this group is by attempting to reduce hospitalisation.

Collecting data from EARs is not simple in the UK, because there are many different systems used by different agencies; access to each requires specific permission and procedures to ensure data security. We were not able to access all data for primary care due to lack of permission from GPs.

In this study, great effort was made to accurately and precisely identify resource use and unit costs, using as standardised an approach as possible. Inter-patient variation in costs were identified, that may not have been apparent if top-down or other more approximate estimation methods had been used. However, given the small contribution to the total costs of many services a case can be made for omitting these costs in future studies of this cohort.

**Conclusions**

This study is the first attempt to use electronic records to identify the real NHS and social care costs in a cohort of frail older people post-AMU discharge. The majority of costs are incurred by a minority of 10%, and three quarters of these costs are incurred in hospitals. This work underlines current complexities of accessing and collecting these data, data which could inform future service configuration in this resource-constrained environment. Until access to EARs improves, the choice is between complete data from small biased samples or incomplete data from larger more representative samples.

**Key points**

- Mean health and social cost in the three months following discharge was £1926.
- Contribution to health and social care costs was primarily secondary care (76.1%), followed by primary care (10.9%) and social care (10.0%).
- The costliest 10% of participants accounted for 50% of the cost.
- The results justify development of interventions to reduce hospitalisation in this group, although these are more likely to be cost effective if targeted upon the minority of higher service users.

**Conflicts of interest**

None declared.

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**Supplementary data**

Supplementary data mentioned in the text is available to subscribers in *Age and Ageing* online.

**References**


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