

## Abstract

**Background:** *It is generally believed that the majority of referral to the psychiatric service is initiated by the general practitioners. However, the local health care system is operating on a market model with both private and public-funded services offering western medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, and folk remedies. With a mixed medical economy where patients can freely access medical attention when they are unwell, it is essential to find out what steps they have taken in reaction to their illness and how they have come to the professional service. Studying their pathways to care would help to understand the sources of delay of psychiatric referral and would suggest ways to improve the detection and handling of psychological problems at the pathway agencies.*

**Method:** *This is a cross-sectional study using a newly developed questionnaire to examine the pathways that patients have taken to reach public psychiatric service in Tuen Mun and Yuen Long, Hong Kong.*

**Results:** *A total of 324 newly referred Chinese participants were interviewed in 4 consecutive weeks. On average, they sought care from 1 kind of informal carer and 1 kind of professional carer before coming to the psychiatric service. The overall pathway was dominated by public non-psychiatric specialties (53.4%), rather than primary care physicians (23.4%). The median interval from the onset of the problem to the first professional carer was 13 weeks; from first professional carer to psychiatric referral was 6.5 weeks; while the median total interval was 39 weeks. The associated duration of treatment was short as compared with the total duration of the illness. 13.9% had self-medicated and 17.9% shopped for carers. 11.4% had consulted Chinese medicine practitioners and 7.1% consulted magical-religious healers. Delays were associated with low educational level, the presence of symptoms resembling the mentally-ill family member, self-medication, carer shopping, Chinese medicine consultation, specific childhood problems and somatic symptoms as the presenting problems and childhood behavioural-emotional disorders. Our results compare favourably with results from the European centres of the WHO cross-cultural study on pathways to psychiatric care.*

**Conclusion:** *In order to shorten the delays in treatment, the interface between psychiatrists and other health care partners has to be enhanced and opportunities exist in providing psychoeducation to both the carers and the general public.*

**Key Words:** *Epidemiology, Chinese, Hong Kong, help-seeking, pathways to care, psychiatric service*