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Proceedings Paper:

Friend, AJ orcid.org/0000-0001-9864-5605, Feltbower, R orcid.org/0000-0002-1728-9408, Glaser, A et al. (2 more authors) (2017) *Mental Health of Long Term Survivors of Childhood and Young Adult Cancer*. In: *Pediatric Blood and Cancer*. 49th Congress of the International Society of Paediatric Oncology (SIOP), 12-15 Oct 2017, Washington, DC, USA. Wiley , S424-S424.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/pbc.26772>

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Mental Health of Long Term Survivors of Childhood and Young Adult Cancer

Background/Objectives

Survivors of young people's cancer are known to have increased risk of psychological distress including cognitive difficulties, however little is known about emotional and behavioural problems. We aimed to collate evidence of the prevalence of mental health problems in long-term survivors of childhood cancer.

Methods

A standard systematic review was performed, excluding papers on cognitive function. We searched the PubMed, Embase/OVID, CINAHL and Web of Science databases using the following strategy:

(child OR children OR childhood OR teen OR teenage* OR adolescent* OR "young adult")

AND (cancer OR leukaemia OR tumour OR tumor)

AND survivor

AND "Mental health" or "mental illness" or "psychiatric" or "psychological" or "emotional" or "behavioural" or "behavioral"

AND "late effects" or "long term"

Results

Initial search results returned over 1500 papers, after discarding papers covering cognitive function and those exploring interventions rather than prevalence, 324 papers remained. We found reports of increased antidepressant use and higher rates of psychological distress in long term survivors of CYP's cancer compared to controls, although many of these were siblings of survivors, who are likely to have their own difficulties. The majority of data came from self-reports, which are associated with high risk of bias. There was also data from hospital admissions for mental health problems and analysis of prescribing data from primary care. We found no papers reporting on primary care-diagnosed mental health problems, despite this being the most common place for mental illness to be diagnosed and treated in many settings.

Discussion

There is a need to more accurately ascertain the prevalence of mental health problems in this group. Data from primary care would significantly improve our understanding of this issue. This would be essential for future service planning. We hope our future work linking primary care records to cancer registries will go some way to addressing this gap in knowledge.