

ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE HOSPITALS

Executive Summary

The growing demand for mental health care intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic period, has led national and supranational authorities over the European space to recognize the need to dedicate special attention to this area of care.

This trend has justified close monitoring, by the Portuguese Health Regulation Authority (ERS), of the evolution of access to mental health care in Portugal. In this context, the ERS carried out a study to analyse various aspects of access to hospital mental health care in the National Health Service (SNS).

Based on a survey applied to all SNS hospitals, carried out between June and August 2023, this analysis of access focused on geographical accessibility to the hospital network offering these services in mainland Portugal, on the actual provision of the services in the period from 2018 to 2022 and on the waiting times for users until they receive mental health care.

Regarding geographical accessibility, it is estimated that the Hospital Referral Network (RRH) for adults covers 74% of the population of mainland Portugal within 30 minutes, with the coverage increasing to 95% when a time limit of 60 minutes is considered. The RRH for child and adolescent care, in turn, covers around 71% of the population within 30 minutes and 94% within 60 minutes.

It should be noted that the human resources allocated to mental health care in the SNS hospitals, relating to the population living in the health regions, grew from 2015 to 2022 in the three types of health professionals considered (doctors, psychologists and nurses).

In what concerns the activity of this network of hospitals, it must be highlighted that the volume of psychiatric consultations has grown steadily since 2018, at an average annual rate of 5%, and that the number of psychology consultations has grown every year, in mainland Portugal, at an average annual growth rate of 12%.

Conversely, the number of mental health inpatient admissions fell, by an average of around 2% a year, between 2018 and 2022. The number of mental health emergency episodes remained constant through the period analysed.

In terms of waiting times, during the first half of 2023, 39% of psychiatric hospital consultations were carried out with a waiting time that exceeded the legally established Maximum Guaranteed Response Times.

Finally, it should be noted that the National Mental Health Program points out that priority should be given to providing care in the community, through the creation of community mental health teams for the adult population and for children and adolescents. In this respect, a total of 66 community mental health teams in SNS hospitals were found to be set up and operational.