

MIGRATION AND ACUTE MENTAL DISORDERS IN ITALY. A COMPARISON STUDY IN A PSYCHIATRIC INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

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Introduction: First-generation immigrants from developed countries appear to be particularly at risk of being diagnosed with a mental disorder after migration. Nevertheless, in Europe immigrated people appear less likely than their native counterparts to access community mental health care. Inequity in treatment may lead to enhanced severity of the disease and consequent emergency referrals.

Aim: The aim of this study was to explore demographic and clinical characteristics in immigrants patients compared to Italian-born patients admitted in a Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) for an acute mental disorder.

Methods: One hundred first-generation immigrant patients were consecutively recruited and compared to 100 age-, gender- and diagnosis-matched Italian-born patients. Subjects were diagnosed according to DSM-IV-TR and rated on the Clinical Global Impression - Severity Scale and the Global Assessment of Functioning. Medical history and demographic information were collected with a study-specific form and were abstracted from medical records.

Results: The majority of patients were admitted to the PICU for an acute psychotic or manic episode. There were no differences in socio-demographic characteristics, in clinical severity scores and global functioning scores between immigrant and Italian-born patients. Despite no differences in age or diagnosis, immigrant patients were significantly more likely to be at the first psychiatric contact (32% vs 15%; $p=0.007$).

Conclusions: Our results suggest a role of migration in the development of acute psychotic or manic episodes. Moreover, limited access for immigrants to community mental health services may lead to longer duration of untreated illness, increased disease severity and consequent emergency referrals.