



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2016

I10 Risk Factors and Legal Implications of Psychiatric Patient Elopement From Hospital Settings

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the risk factors associated with elopement from hospitals by psychiatric patients, the theoretical environmental risk factors for elopement on medical wards, and the legal ramifications of elopement.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing a topic that is not very well understood or studied. This presentation will highlight the need for extending the span of risk assessments to include the risk of elopement from hospital settings and, in particular, less secure wards.

Patient elopement from medical and psychiatric wards is an unfavorable event with a potential for bad outcomes including harm to the patient and/or others. There are studies that have associated adverse consequences including loss of treatment, violence, and suicide with elopement from psychiatric wards; however, the literature on elopement is generally scarce, with most papers hailing from countries outside of the United States, including Australia and the United Kingdom, with none addressing elopement from medical wards. Moreover, most of the literature is found in nursing journals with no articles approaching the topic from a forensic psychiatry perspective.

Elopement is generally viewed as a heterogeneous event associated with various risk factors. Prospective and retrospective studies have been conducted to try and determine these risk factors associated with elopement. The risk factors that have been most associated with elopement include: psychosis; previous history of elopement; young age; and medication non-compliance; however, different methodologies and definitions of elopement in the literature make it difficult to determine the positive predictive value of these various risk factors.

Patients with severe psychiatric illnesses often find themselves on medical wards due to co-morbid medical problems that require immediate attention; however, most medicine floors are generally viewed as not being as secure as psychiatric wards because there are no locked doors. Moreover, non-psychiatric physicians and nursing staff are not as accustomed to dealing with acute behavioral problems secondary to psychiatric illnesses nor to the various legal issues that surround treating unwilling patients. It is postulated that a risk assessment for elopement that takes into account the acuity of both the patient's medical and psychiatric conditions in order to determine appropriate placement should be made in the emergency department.

The purpose of this presentation is to review the associated risk factors of elopement from psychiatric wards based on the literature. Moreover, an attempt will be made to look at the differences between psychiatric and medical wards and how these differences may contribute to easier elopement from medical wards. Finally, a review of the legal literature will be presented to explore the legal ramifications of patient elopement from a psychiatric-legal perspective.

Elopement, Medicolegal, Risk Factors