Adolescents' Experiences During "Boarding" Hospitalization While Awaiting Inpatient Psychiatric Treatment Following Suicidal Ideation or Suicide Attempt

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Two million adolescents experience suicidal ideation (SI) or suicide attempt (SA) annually, and they frequently present to emergency departments. Delays in transfer to inpatient psychiatric units increasingly lead to "boarding" in emergency departments and inpatient medical units. We sought to understand adolescents' perspectives during boarding hospitalizations to gain insight into helpful practices and targets for improvement. Using convenience sampling, we conducted semistructured interviews with 27 adolescents hospitalized for SI or SA while they were awaiting transfer to an inpatient psychiatric facility. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the thematic analysis was organized using NVivo 11. RESULTS: Eight themes emerged: (1) supportive clinical interactions, (2) information needs, (3) repetitive inquiries, (4) safety, (5) previous hospital experiences, (6) activities and boredom, (7) physical comfort, and (8) emotions. Adolescents expressed appreciation for compassionate clinicians and for receiving information about what to expect, experienced the hospital as a safe environment, emphasized the value of staying occupied and of physical comfort, and were relieved to be receiving help to reduce their suicidal thoughts or behaviors. Reports of embarrassment and discomfort about repeated inquiries from the clinical team, comparisons with previous hospital experiences, and unanswered questions about what would occur during the planned inpatient psychiatric hospitalization were common. The perspectives of adolescents seeking care for SI or SA are an important source of information for health care systems seeking to improve hospital care. Clinicians can relieve distress of adolescents awaiting psychiatric hospitalization by focusing on compassionate connection, minimizing repeated inquiries, and providing complete and concrete information about treatment plans.

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