

School-Based Health Services & Improving Students' Mental Health

Associate Professor Simon Denny, Dr Hamish Howie, Sue Grant, Ross Galbreath, Dr Jennifer Utter, Dr Theresa Fleming and Dr Terryann Clark

Introduction

Mental health problems are global, and a common burden for adolescents. One avenue for improving access and support for adolescents is through school-based health services (SBHS). These provide comprehensive and appropriate care, which aims to be accessible and low-cost. While SBHS have been shown to improve access to mental health services, evidence of their effectiveness in terms of students' mental health has been limited. In New Zealand, SBHS can vary from occasional visits by a health professional to comprehensive well-resourced clinics with a permanent team of health professionals on-site.



Image: Hepingting

Key Questions:

- Do students with School-Based Health Services have better mental health?
- Which characteristics of school health services are associated with students' mental well-being?
- What policies exist to support their development?

Study

Student data were collected as part of an anonymous nationally representative survey of the health and well-being of secondary school students conducted in 2012. The survey used two-stages, involving a random selection of high schools, and then, within the 91 schools that agreed to participate, taking a random selection of 20% of the school roll. In total, 8500 randomly selected secondary school students completed the survey, accounting for 3% of all students.

A school health survey filled in by senior management within participating schools looked at the level of health services in their school and included:

- facilities available
- use of routine comprehensive psychosocial assessments
- level of collaboration with the pastoral care team within the school
- integration of the school health service with the rest of the school
- presence of a relationship with local primary health services.

Study Hypothesis: Better student mental health is associated with comprehensive, well-resourced school health services that are well-integrated within the school and community

The questionnaire also sought information on their professional role: hours per week usually worked at the school, and availability and helpfulness of specialist mental health support

Results

Some of the biggest differences between schools in their level of school health services were between state-funded schools and privately funded schools: **75% of private schools had first aid only compared to 12.5% of integrated schools and 4.5% of state-funded schools.**

Schools in decile bands 1 to 3 reported higher levels of school-health services than other schools, which is consistent with mandated funding of school health services in low socio-economic communities in NZ.

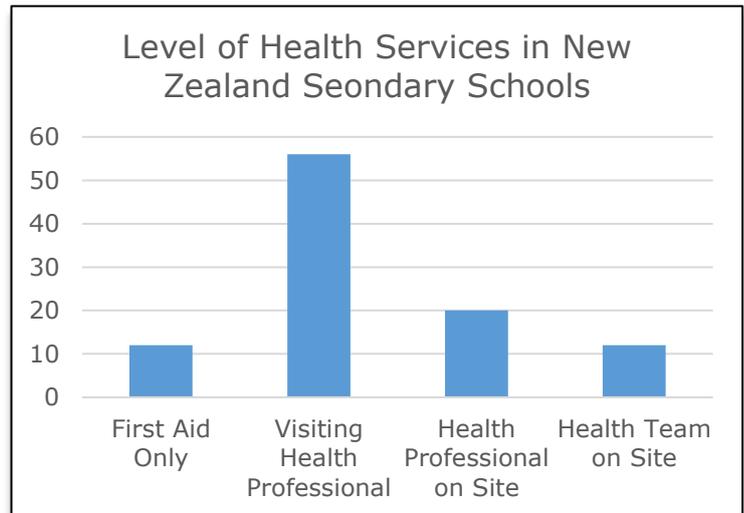
Higher levels of school health services were characterised by **more comprehensive facilities, staffing hours and integration with the school and local community.** They were also associated with better clinic facilities, more doctor and nursing hours, the provision of routine comprehensive psychosocial assessments, greater collaboration of the health service with the school pastoral care team, closer integration of the health team service with the school and better relationships with local primary care providers. Fewer students reported depressive symptoms, total difficulties and suicidality.

Limitations

- SBHS may have been concentrated in schools with students experiencing low rates of mental health problems, but this seems unlikely given the targeting of school health services to low socio-economic schools.
- Analysis is based on the provision of SBHS rather than student utilization of those services.
- The study excludes those absent from school and those no longer enrolled at school

Main findings

Higher levels of SBHS are associated with better student mental health. Furthermore, some specific health service characteristics are positively associated with better mental health among students, namely increased nurse and doctor (GP) time per week and the provision of routine comprehensive psychosocial assessments. Identifying and supporting students with mental health concerns requires asking the right questions in an environment whereby the student has trust in the clinician and the clinician has time to support and follow-up issues causing the student distress.



Key Policy Implications:

- Well-resourced and comprehensive SBHS are associated with better mental health among students
- SBHS are an important avenue for support and help for young people experiencing difficulties in their life, especially around mental health issues.
- School health services need multidisciplinary teams, well-integrated in the school, to be the most effective
- School health services need adequate resourcing, so that clinicians working in SBHS have the time needed to help and make a difference for students accessing help.

Previous studies of SBHS have only compared the presence or absence of school health services, or compared users or non-users of school health services. **Our study identifies particular characteristics of SBHS associated with better mental health, including the amount of doctor and nursing time provided and the provision of routine comprehensive psychosocial assessments.** Trends suggest a synergism where more comprehensive, better-resourced services are better able to manage the broad range of youth mental health needs.

To find out more about this research, please visit:

<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/doi/full/10.1177/1355819617716196>

Contact: s.denny@auckland.ac.nz

Adapted with assistance from Suzanne Woodward, PPI