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WORKING GROUP

Activities of the Mental Health Working Group of the Spanish Society of Pediatric Emergency Medicine

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In recent years, there has been a growing trend in the deterioration of mental health among children and adolescents, demonstrated by an increase in depressive symptoms, self-injury, and suicidal behaviors[(1)]. While this problem has been worsening since the 1990s, it has been significantly exacerbated in recent years following the onset of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Several studies indicate that since the initiation of the pandemic, the prevalence of mental disorders in children aged 4 to 14 has tripled, and Pediatric Emergency Departments (PEDs) have reported a 47% increase in consultations related to mental health disorders compared to pre-pandemic levels[(2)]. Alarmingly, according to the Suicide Observatory in Spain, 22 deaths by suicide were recorded in children under 15 years old in 2021, and in 2022, the number of suicides among adolescents aged 15 to 19 rose from 53 to 75 cases compared to the previous year[(3)]. These figures highlight the urgent need to prioritize child and adolescent mental health, making it essential for pediatricians to receive comprehensive training in this area.

In this context, at the end of 2021, the Mental Health Working Group (WG) of the Spanish Society of Pediatric Emergency Medicine (SEUP) was created. It is a heterogeneous and multidisciplinary WG, with professionals from different fields, including emergency pediatricians, primary care pediatricians, pediatric and mental health nurses, psychologists, and psychiatrists. Since its formation, the group has developed various initiatives aimed at enhancing the tools available to emergency pediatricians for addressing mental health issues.

Our first project was carried out in 2022, with the project "How to approach a patient with a psychiatric condition" to improve the quality of care. It was carried out following the indications of the SEUP Safety and Quality WG, using the Delphi method, resulting in 11 recommendations presented in Figure 1.

In 2022, within the SEUP, the use of mental health-related diagnoses in 16 pediatric emergency departments (EDs) was analyzed, comparing the pre- and post-pandemic periods. The results of this study showed an increase of up to 56% in the diagnosis of suicide/suicide attempt/suicidal ideation, a 40% increase in the diagnosis of eating disorders (ED) and a 10% increase in the diagnosis of aggressive crisis/psychomotor agitation[(2)]. Based on these findings, our second project consisted in the development of a SEUP protocol on the "Main psychiatric emergencies in Pediatric Emergency Departments." This protocol consists of three sections: attempted self-harm, ED, and psychomotor agitation, and will soon be available at https://seup.org/protocolos/.

Similarly, the WG recently presented the "Quick Guide to the Care of Mental Health Patients in the Emergency Department"[(4)], focusing on conditions such as ED, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempts, psychomotor agitation, autism spectrum disorder, and sensory-perceptual disturbances. These guidelines were developed as an initial framework for assessing patients with these disorders, acknowledging the diverse realities of PEDs across the country and the varying profiles of professionals involved in the care of minors with mental health conditions.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a structured framework for initial assessments and basic management, based on the most common reasons for consultation. The aim is to enhance care and improve strategies for approaching these patients. Each guide includes both general sections and sections specific to the particular reason for consultation.

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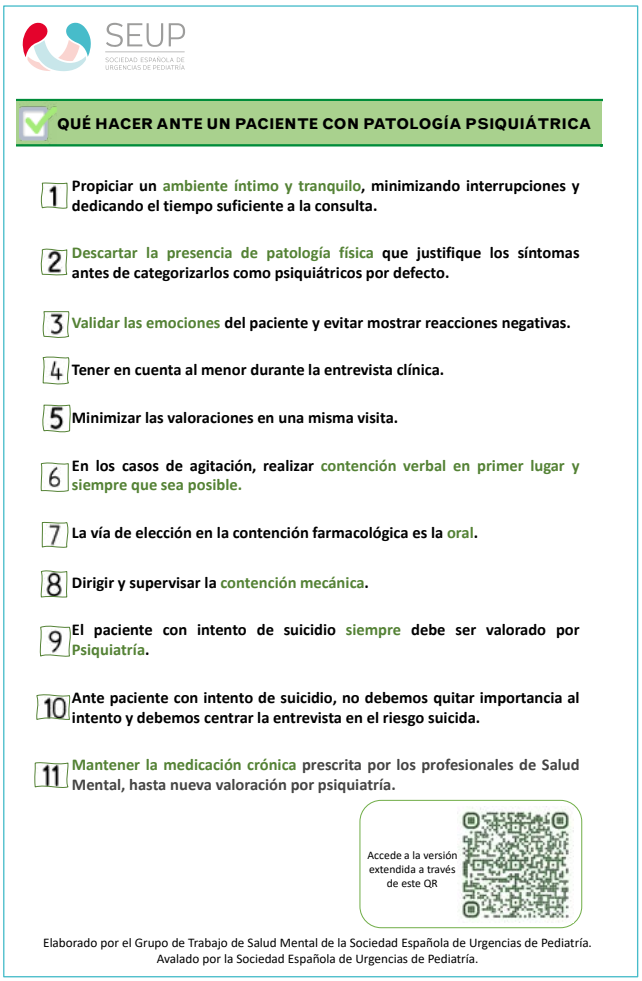

FIGURE 1. Approach to a patient with a psychiatric condition in the Pediatric Emergency Department.

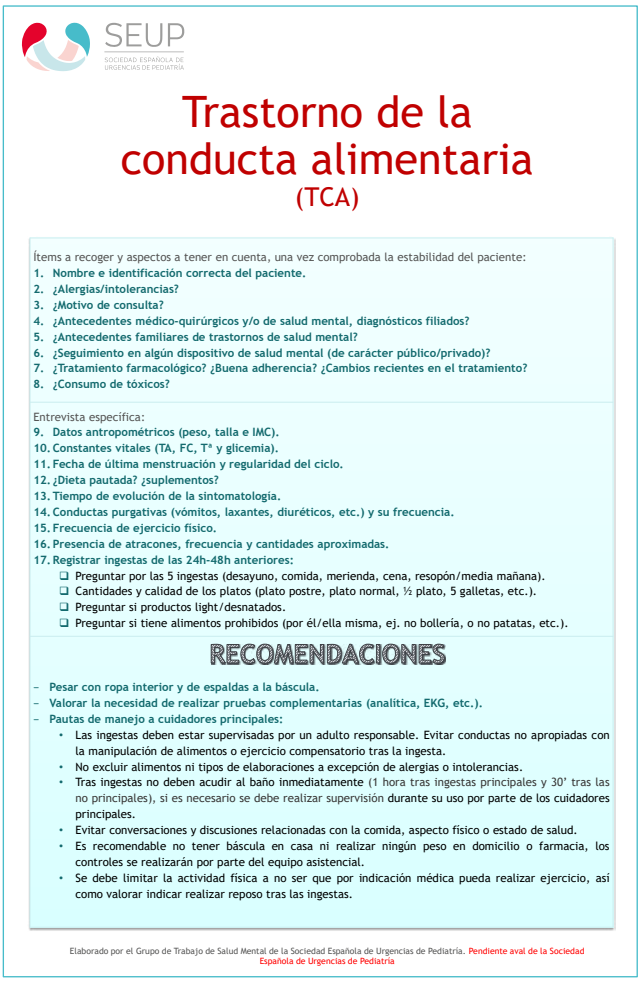

FIGURE 2. Quick guide to the care of the patient with eating disorders in the Emergency Department.

Figure 2 illustrates one such guide, and all of them can be accessed at the following link: https://seup.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Tarjetas-de-bienvenida-unificadas-AVAL.pdf.

Additionally, over the past year, other activities have been conducted, such as the online seminar held in May 2024, titled "Psychiatric emergencies: a challenge for pediatricians. Clinical cases," which will soon be available at https://seup.org/seminarios-online/.

Another important point to highlight is that, since the formation of the WG, we have been collaborating with other organizations, such as the Mental Health Committee of the Spanish Association of Pediatrics (Asociacion Española de Pediatría, AEP), to improve the care provided to pediatric patients with mental health disorders across the entire continuum of care.

Finally, we would like to share our latest projects. We are currently working on finalizing and disseminating a survey on basic structures (both human and material) for the care of patients with mental health disorders. Additionally, we are developing an observatory to analyze trends in PED consultations related to child and adolescent mental health.

Through these and our future projects, we aim to develop tools that will enhance our training and enable us to provide the highest quality care to children and adolescents with mental health problems. It is essential to remember that treatment must be comprehensive, incorporating primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention strategies.

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