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Where have all the children gone? Decreases in Paediatric Emergency Department attendances at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

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3 Where have all the children gone? Decreases in Paediatric Emergency Department
4 attendances at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.
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7 On Wednesday March 11th 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global
8 pandemic of COVID-19¹ – the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a novel coronavirus first
9 reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019². Whilst the body of knowledge around the virus
10 and the disease it causes grows on a daily basis, relatively little is known about the course of
11 COVID-19 in children and young people (CYP, defined here as those under the age of 16)³.
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14 If the epidemiology of the pandemic in the UK follows that of countries with similar
15 demographics and healthcare provision, it is likely that the burden of disease will fall
16 predominantly on older age groups⁴. Although CYP can become infected with SARS-CoV-2, it
17 appears that they are mainly asymptomatic or experience mild symptoms³, resulting in a much
18 smaller number of COVID-19-related ED attendances in those under the age of 16. Many
19 clinicians have reported the beginning of a trend of decreasing attendances at EDs, following the
20 start of the pandemic, particularly amongst paediatric populations.
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23 We therefore compared weekly ED attendance data for CYP (< 16 years of age at presentation)
24 attending since the first reported cases of COVID-19 in the UK (end of January 2020) with the
25 same weeks in 2019 (Figure 1). Two hospitals in Greater Manchester were included, a large
26 district general hospital (DGH) with a co-located Paediatric Emergency Department (PED) and a
27 regional children's hospital (CH) providing secondary and tertiary care via a dedicated CYP-only
28 PED.
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31 When comparing the months of February and March in 2019 and 2020, the DGH saw PED
32 attendances decrease by 5.6% and 30.4% respectively, and the CH decreases of 0.6% in February
33 2020 and 33.8% in March. The decrease in attendances amongst CYP has accelerated since the
34 "UK lockdown" announcement of March 23rd 2020.
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FIGURE 1 HERE

The question is, therefore, where have all the children gone? The reasons that they aren't attending (or, in most cases, being brought) are almost certainly a complex reflection of the changing behaviours and concerns of their parents and carers in a pandemic situation, but the real concern is that they remain at home, some of them with very important and serious pathology that can (and needs to) be treated. Additionally, the current social distancing measures mean that children living in difficult circumstances have reduced access to the safety net of regular contact with education, health, and social care professionals. This may have an impact on the number of vulnerable children experiencing neglect or maltreatment, in the same way increases in domestic violence are being reported in media around the world.

Whilst CYP – by virtue of their apparently less serious clinical course – may be relatively invisible within the current pandemic, this has wide ranging implications and warrants further investigation. Whilst we have presented here a very limited initial analysis of an emerging dataset, we would encourage colleagues around the world to capture information around their own patterns of attendance and reflect (and then act) on the wider implications of what they find.

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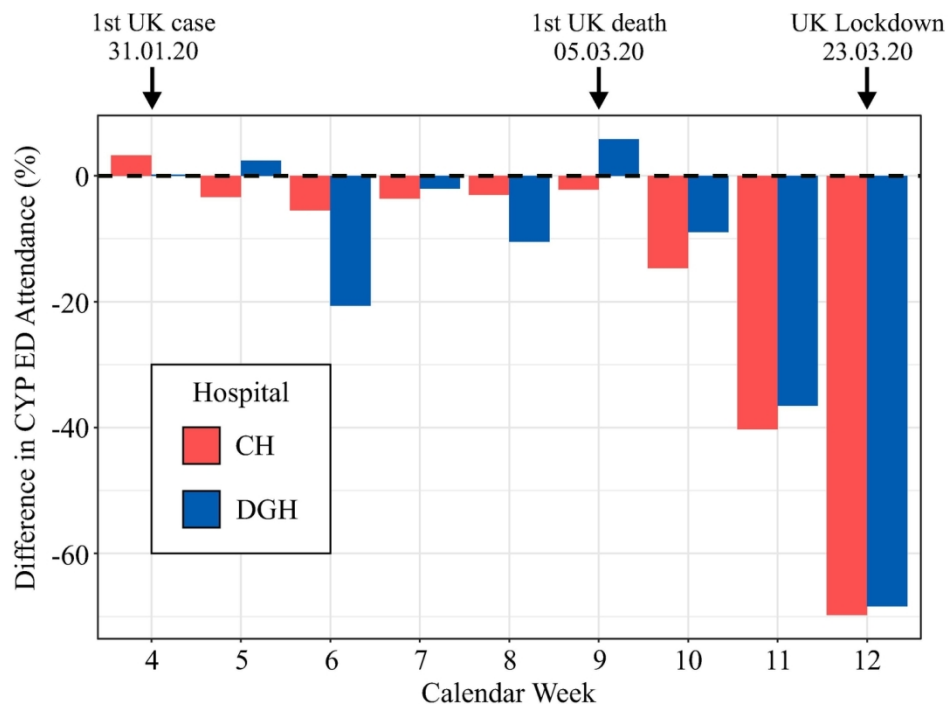


Figure 1. Weekly comparison of children and young people (< 16 years of age at presentation), attending the Paediatric Emergency Departments at the District General Hospital (DGH) and Children's Hospital (CH), 2019 vs 2020.

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