

Fall-Related Hospitalizations: What's in Season?

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Falls constitute a significant public health problem. Epidemiologic studies of diverse populations have demonstrated the significant morbidity, mortality and cost to the health care system caused by falls.¹ Although considerable attention has been focussed on the health consequences of falls in the elderly,² there is evidence to suggest that falls constitute an important element of injury across all ages.³ Children and young adults may represent significant populations at risk.

A full understanding of the etiologic factors associated with falls requires a comprehensive epidemiologic analysis of the phenomenon. Many studies have examined risk factors such as age, medication use, location of falls, and other environmental and host factors that are associated with falls.^{4,5} An important factor in the epidemiological understanding of events are its temporal features.

The objective of this study was to examine the seasonal patterns of hospitalization associated with falls. Specifically, this study sought to examine whether different seasonal patterns in fall-related admissions occurred in different age groups. To our knowledge, there exist no studies that examine comprehensively the seasonality of fall-related hospital admissions for an entire population.

METHODS

We conducted a retrospective, population-based study to explore temporal patterns of fall-related hospitalizations in different age groups from April 1, 1988 through February 28, 1999 for approximately 14 million residents of Ontario. The Canadian Institute for Health Information Discharge Abstract Database was used to obtain temporal information on the incidence of hospitalization related to falls (International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision, Clinical Modification codes E880-E888) and patient demographics. Although age groups were initially divided into 10-year periods (i.e., 0-9, 10-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60+), striking similarities among these groups with respect to temporal patterns justified collapsing them into four main age groups (i.e., 0-9, 10-29, 30-59, 60+). The data were collected in monthly intervals and the total number of admissions was assessed for each month. Annual census data for each age group for residents of Ontario were provided by Statistics Canada. Monthly estimates were derived through linear interpolation.

Time series analysis^{6,7} – a collection of techniques for modelling autocorrelation in temporally sequenced data – was conducted to assess seasonal variations and trends over time. Spectral analysis⁶ was conducted to assess cyclical patterns in event occurrence following inspection of the autocorrelation function. The data series was detrended using ordinary least squares regression prior to conducting spectral analysis. Future projections to the year 2003 based on current trends were derived using exponential smoothing models.⁷ All analyses were conducted using SAS

for UNIX, Version 6.12 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC).

RESULTS

During the study period, 455,103 fall-related hospitalizations were observed in Ontario (Figure 1). Complementary seasonal patterns were observed for the 0-9 year (FK=44.8, p<0.01, BK=0.64, p<0.01, m-1=58) and 30-59 year (FK=28.9, p<0.01, BK=0.50, p<0.01, m-1=58) age groups (Figure 1). The 0-9 year age group experienced increased fall-related hospital admissions during typically warmer months (May through November) and a downward trend over time (p<0.01) whereas the 30-59 year age group experienced increases in the typically colder months (December-April) and a neutral trend over time (p=0.88). The 10-29 year old group experienced fluctuations in seasonal admission peaks corresponding to higher admissions in months of more extreme temperature (Figure 1; January-March and July-September; FK=25.0, BK=0.32, m-1=58, p<0.01) and a downward trend over time (p<0.01). Weaker patterns of seasonal variation in admissions were observed in the 60 and older age group, with peaks in admissions occurring in the typically colder months (Figure 1; December-April; FK=11.1, p<0.01, BK=0.17, p=0.06, m-1=58) and an upward trend over time (p<0.01). The hospitalization rate was 4-10 fold higher for this age group than for the other age groups.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that fall-related hospitalizations occur throughout the

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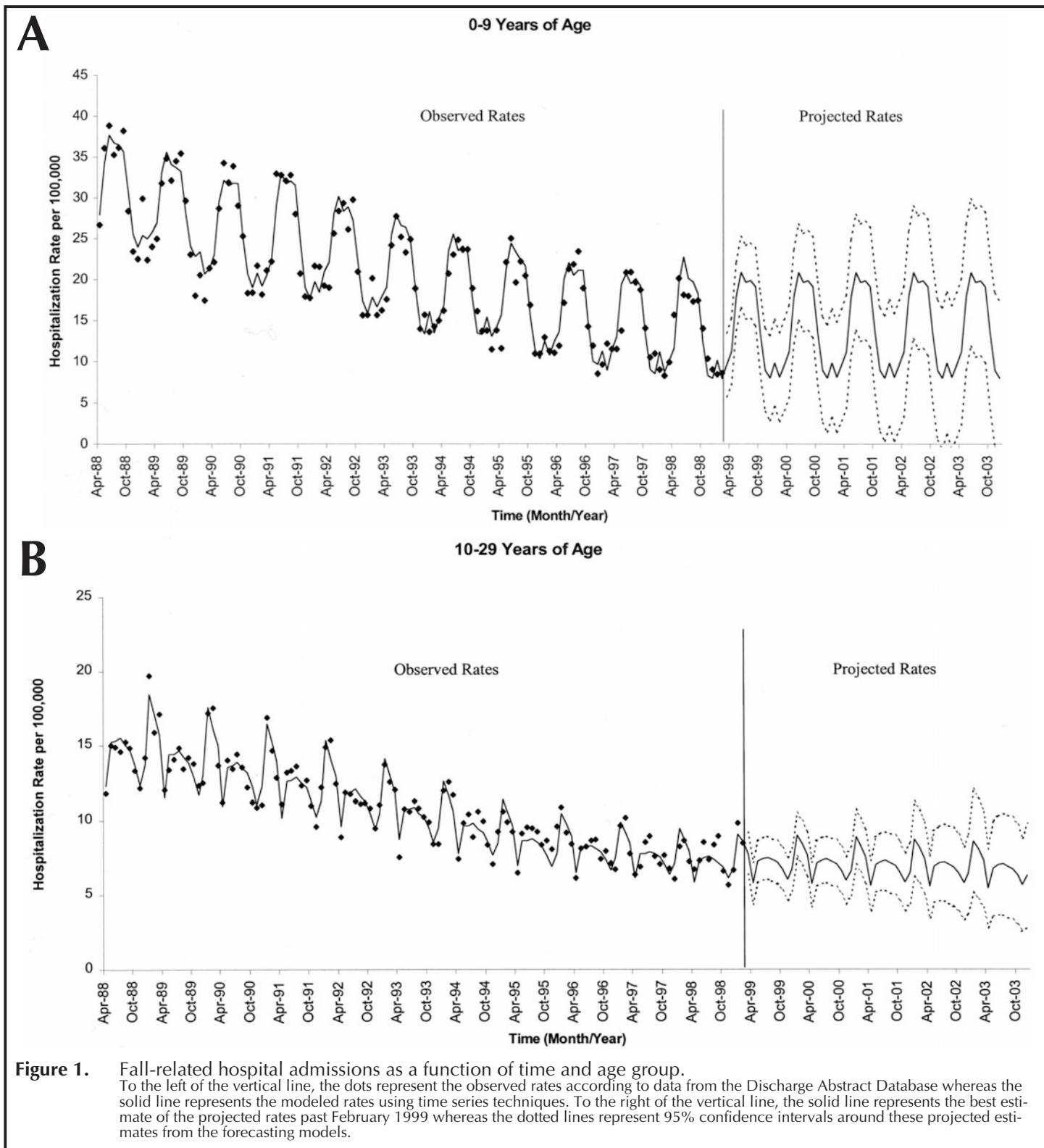


Figure 1. Fall-related hospital admissions as a function of time and age group.

To the left of the vertical line, the dots represent the observed rates according to data from the Discharge Abstract Database whereas the solid line represents the modeled rates using time series techniques. To the right of the vertical line, the solid line represents the best estimate of the projected rates past February 1999 whereas the dotted lines represent 95% confidence intervals around these projected estimates from the forecasting models.

population and display different seasonal patterns for different age groups. More detailed analysis of this seasonal phenomenon is required, particularly on the basis of age and sex. The data have clearly

important implications for prevention programs and health services organization. Although the causative factors associated with these observed seasonal increases requires further analysis, it can be specu-

lated that inclement weather plays a significant role in the etiology of falls for adults in the winter. The extent to which winter falls in adults contributes to annual crowding in emergency rooms warrants

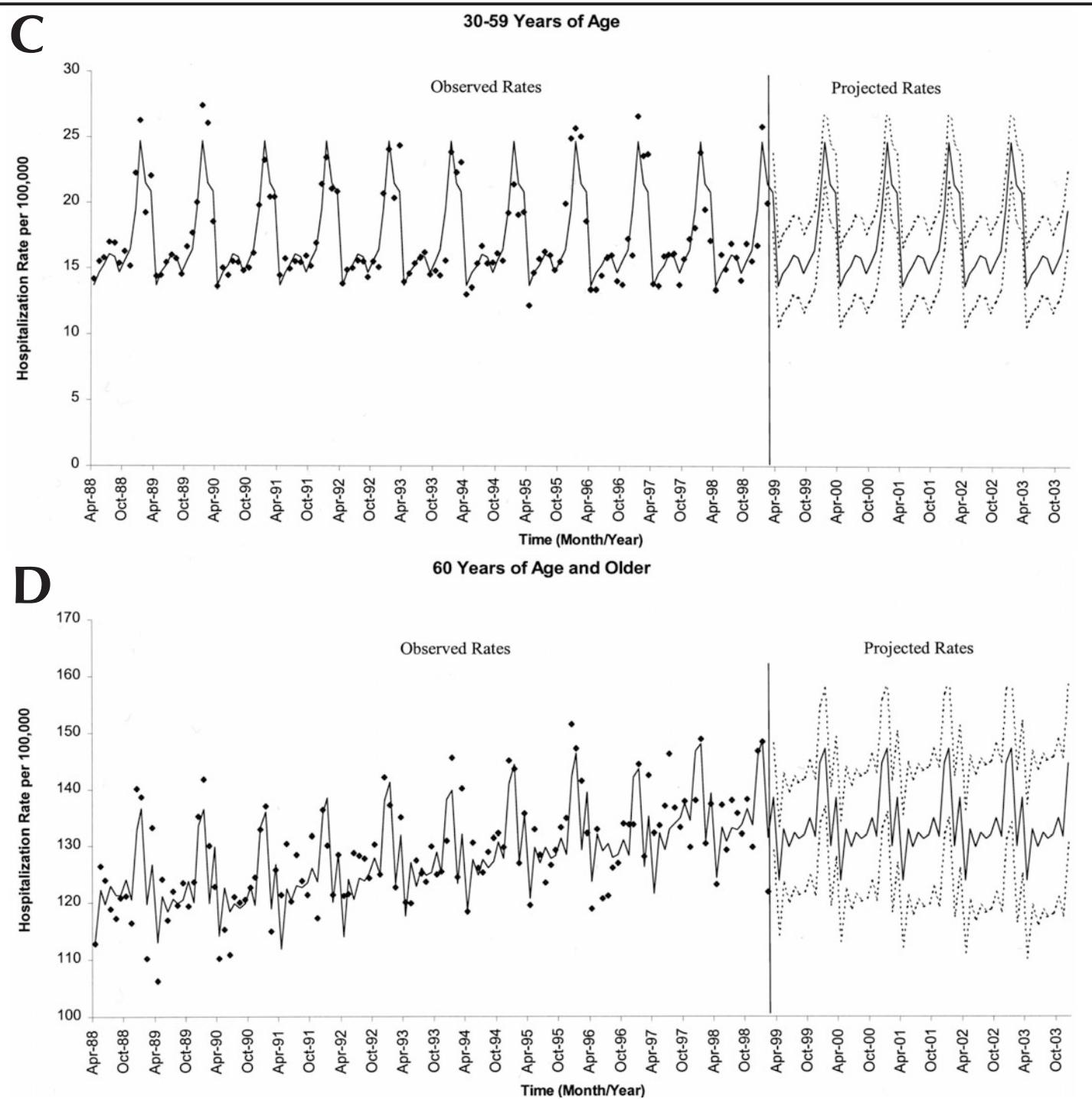


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further research. Injury prevention programs for young children should perhaps concentrate on the determinants of falls in summer. Hospitalizations represent the most severe complications of fall-related

injury. This analysis will not capture those falls that did not result in hospitalization and may be limited to environments with seasonal variations similar to those of Canada.

Though the elderly account for the largest number of hospitalizations, the risk is evident in every age strata and varies significantly according to age and season.

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