




REVIEW

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# Duration of untreated eating disorder and relationship to outcomes: A systematic review of the literature

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This systematic review assesses the average duration of untreated eating disorder (DUEd) in help-seeking populations at the time of first eating disorder (ED) treatment and investigates the relationship between DUEd and symptom severity/clinical outcomes.

**Method:** PRISMA guidelines were followed throughout. Selected studies provided information on either: (i) length of DUEd, (ii) components of DUEd, (iii) cross-sectional associations between DUEd and symptom severity, (iv) associations between DUEd and clinical outcomes, or (v) experimental manipulation of DUEd. Study quality was assessed.

**Results:** Fourteen studies from seven countries were included. Across studies, average DUEd weighted by sample size was 29.9 months for anorexia nervosa, 53.0 months for bulimia nervosa and 67.4 months for binge eating disorder. A younger age at time of first treatment was indicative of shorter DUEd. Retrospective studies suggest that a shorter DUEd may be related to a greater likelihood of remission. Manipulation of DUEd by shortening service-related delays may improve clinical outcomes.

**Conclusions:** Data on length of DUEd provide a benchmark for early intervention in EDs. Preliminary evidence suggests DUEd may be a modifiable factor influencing outcomes in EDs. To accurately determine the role of DUEd, definition and measurement must be uniformly operationalised.

## KEYWORDS

anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, duration of untreated illness, early intervention, eating disorder

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The principles of early intervention and associated stage models of disease are widely accepted in medicine. Early intervention has been defined as early detection followed by stage-specific or proportionate intervention, for as long as necessary and effective (McGorry, Ratheesh, & O'Donoghue, 2018). This approach has led to improved survival rates and better outcomes in many disorders, from

cancer to cardiovascular disease. In relation to mental health, these ideas have been most enthusiastically taken up by the psychosis field and have influenced research and policy. Early intervention services for psychosis are now 'mainstream' in many countries (McGorry & Mei, 2018). These developments are underpinned by a solid evidence-base from randomised controlled trials, finding that early intervention is superior to treatment as usual (TAU; Correll et al., 2018). In this context, attempts to reduce the duration

of untreated psychosis (DUP), that is, the time from onset of symptoms to the start of treatment, have been a key strategy of early intervention programmes for promoting favourable long-term outcomes of first episode psychosis (Oliver et al., 2018; Penttilä, Jääskeläinen, Hirvonen, Isohanni, & Miettunen, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2018). This is with the aim of preventing neuroprogression, that is, neurobiological changes associated with psychosis symptoms which unfavourably affect the illness trajectory (Gama, Kunz, Magalhaes, & Kapczinski, 2013; Moylan, Maes, Wray, & Berk, 2013).

Many of the arguments made in relation to psychosis also apply to eating disorders (EDs). As in psychosis, the peak onset of EDs spans adolescence into emerging adulthood, about age 15–25 (Schmidt et al., 2016), with new EDs rarely presenting after age 30 (Micali, Hagberg, Petersen, & Treasure, 2013). It has been known for some time that longer illness duration is a key predictor of poor outcome in EDs (Steinhausen, 2002). In addition, and similar to psychosis and bipolar disorder, converging data support the idea that neurobiological changes associated with disordered eating unfavourably affect the illness trajectory of EDs (O'Hara, Campbell, & Schmidt, 2015; Steinglass & Walsh, 2016). Provisional staging models for EDs have been developed, suggesting that illness stage at diagnosis is predictive of later outcomes (Maguire et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that early stage EDs can be defined as less than 3 years illness duration, beyond which the treatment response becomes more muted (Ambwani et al., 2020; Treasure, Stein, & Maguire, 2015). A service model for early intervention in EDs has been developed and tested in the UK (Brown et al., 2018; Fukutomi et al., 2020; McClelland et al., 2018; Schmidt, Brown, McClelland, Glennon, & Mountford, 2016) and is included in national guidance as a positive practice example [National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (NCCMH), 2019].

Despite the parallels to psychosis and the availability of a plausible rationale for early intervention, the ED field has been slow to adopt early intervention approaches. Existing efforts have been piecemeal, and hampered by a number of problems, with traditional service designs, separating services for children and adolescents from those for adults, being just one of them [see Davey & McGorry, 2019 for discussion of these issues in relation to depression].

Nonetheless, national guidance is now increasingly supporting the need for early intervention approaches in EDs [e.g., National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2017]. However, if successful strategies for early intervention for EDs are to be developed, a clear understanding of duration of untreated ED (DUED), pathways into care, and delays in accessing specialist treatments during a first episode ED, are necessary. This

## Highlights

- This systematic review is the first to examine duration of untreated eating disorder (DUED) across different eating disorders. Definitions and measurement of DUED and its components vary considerably between studies.
- Across different eating disorders average DUED weighted by sample size ranges from approximately two and a half years (for anorexia nervosa) to nearly 6 years (for binge eating disorder).
- DUED appears to be related to age such that younger patients have shorter DUED.

goes beyond documenting overall DUED and involves identifying specific sources of delay in different ED diagnoses and populations (e.g., adolescents or adults). Previously, DUP has been divided into three components (Birchwood et al., 2013): (i) a period where an individual experiences symptoms, but does not recognise that they have a problem; (ii) a period where an individual recognises that they have a problem, but are not yet ready to seek help; and (iii) a period where an individual has sought help, and is waiting for treatment. Similar components could plausibly be applied to EDs.

The overall aim of this review is to better understand DUED, its component delays and its impact on outcome in different ED diagnoses and populations, and to provide a benchmark for early intervention.

## 1.1 | Objectives

This review aims to answer the following questions:

What is the typical length of DUED for different ED diagnoses [anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN), binge eating disorder (BED), otherwise specified eating disorder (OSFED)], and populations (children, adolescents, adults, male, or female)?

What are the different components of DUED?

Is DUED cross-sectionally associated with symptom severity?

Is DUED associated with long-term clinical outcomes?

Is experimental manipulation of DUED associated with improved outcomes?

## 2 | METHOD

A systematic review (i.e., an organised and transparent method of gathering, evaluating, and synthesizing data

applicable to specific research questions) was conducted. While a traditional meta-analysis (e.g., calculating a pooled measure of effect from multiple RCTs) was not conducted, a meta-analytic approach, whereby quantitative results from multiple studies are combined into a summary statistic, was used.

PRISMA guidelines for conducting systematic reviews were applied (<http://prisma-statement.org/>). The search strategy was designed by two reviewers (M.F. and A.A.). The protocol was registered with PROSPERO (CRD42018110884). Relevant literature was identified by searching PubMed, World of Science, and PsycINFO. We used the following search terms: ('duration of untreated' OR DUED OR 'illness duration' OR 'duration of illness' OR 'early intervention' OR 'first episode') AND (eating disorder\* OR anorexia nervosa OR bulimi\* OR binge eat\*). The terms were used to search all fields and no language or publication date restrictions were imposed at this point.

Detailed information on search strategy, eligibility criteria, data extraction, quality assessment, and data synthesis are available in Supplementary Methods. The search was conducted from inception until December 17, 2019. Average DUED was calculated for each population group (i.e., diagnosis, age) in two ways: (i) A simple mean weighted by sample size and (ii) meta-analytic estimates weighted by the inverse variance of the DUED. The meta-analytic approach allows statistically efficient 95% CI intervals to be calculated for the pooled average incorporating both sampling and between study heterogeneity. Here, we use the IVHet approach which arguably corrects the under-estimation of statistical error which can result from a random effects model under conditions of high heterogeneity (Doi, Barendregt, Khan, Thalib, & Williams, 2015). We present both sample size weighted means in addition to meta-analytic means as estimations of variance are subject to sampling error. The MetaXL plugin for Microsoft Excel was used which is freely available to download and install from [www.epigear.com](http://www.epigear.com). As the Beat (2017) report was potentially less methodologically robust than the other studies (i.e., used self-report data for illness onset, treatment start, and diagnosis), used a broader definition of onset than the other studies, and had the longest DUEDs across different EDs, a sensitivity analysis was run to explore its influence on the overall pooled estimate.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Characteristics of included studies

The results of the study search are detailed in the PRISMA diagram in Figure 1. The search produced 1862 articles, of

which 865 were duplicates. Based on the abstracts, 30 articles were eligible for full-text screening, and 13 of these were excluded as they either did not report on DUED or it was unclear whether study participants were experiencing a first episode. We identified two previous systematic reviews on early intervention in AN (Schoemaker, 1997) and BN (Reas, Schoemaker, Zipfel, & Williamson, 2001). The Schoemaker (1997) review used duration of illness as a proxy for 'time between onset and first admission', stating, 'duration of illness is the only indirect estimate available at this time' (p. 2). None of the articles from this review met our inclusion criteria. Likewise, Reas et al. (2001) used duration of illness as an approximation of DUED and thus did not meet our criteria.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the 14 included studies. These were from seven countries, that is, Australia, Canada, Germany, Republic of Ireland, Singapore, Spain, and the UK. All studies reported DUED using a statistic of central tendency. Four studies ( $n = 2,246$ ) reported a component breakdown of DUED, (Beat, 2017; Brown et al., 2018; Gumz et al., 2018; Schlegl et al., 2019), two ( $n = 787$ ) reported DUED and its cross-sectional association with symptom severity (Bühren et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2020), and one ( $n = 38$ ) reported associations between DUED and long-term clinical outcomes (Andrés-Pepiñá et al., 2019). Three studies ( $n = 721$ ) attempted to experimentally manipulate DUED (Brown et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2020; Gumz et al., 2018), one of which ( $n = 142$ ) also reported the prospective associations between DUED and clinical outcomes (McClelland et al., 2018).

##### 3.1.1 | Participants

Overall, 5,032 patients were included in the selected studies. Information on patient diagnosis and age by study can be found in Table 1 and Supplementary Material.

##### 3.1.2 | Methodological characteristics and quality

Details on study characteristics can be found in Table 1 and details on methodological quality can be found in Supplementary Material. Three studies ( $n = 275$ ) measured the onset of EDs, and therefore start of DUED, through a clinical interview using Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013) or International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 1992) diagnostic criteria (Gumz et al., 2018; Neubauer et al., 2014; Weigel

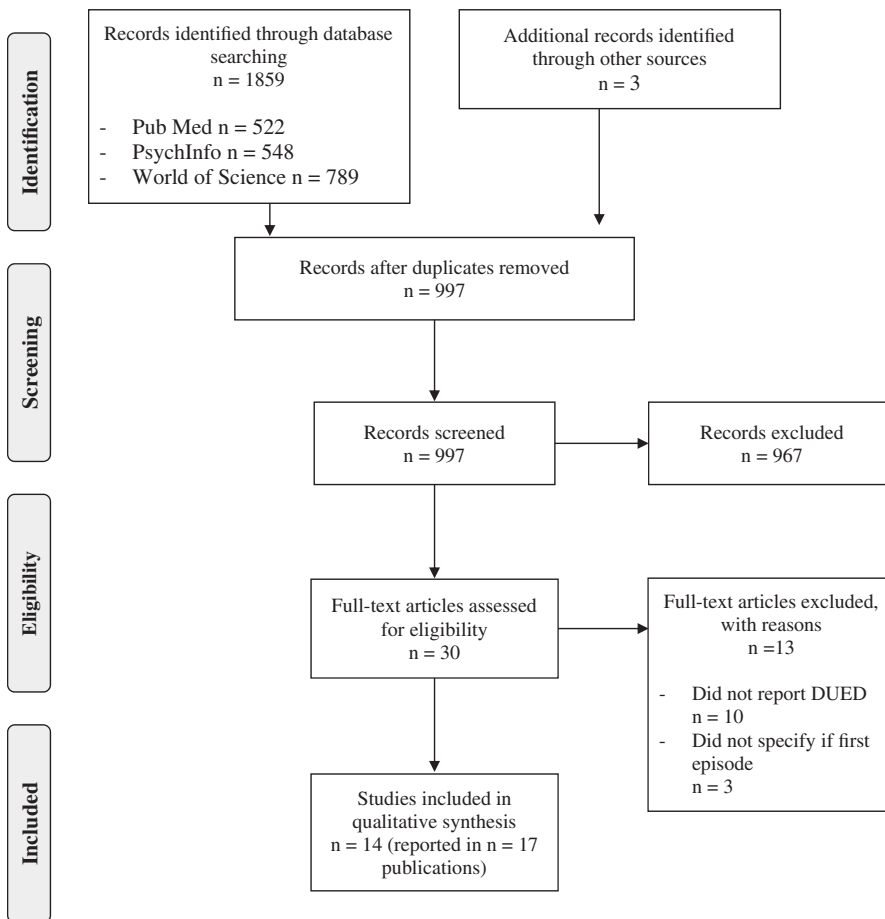


FIGURE 1 Prisma flow diagram

et al., 2014). Two studies ( $n = 644$ ) used a clinical interview plus an additional research assessment with an adapted version of the eating disorder diagnostic scale (Stice, Telch, & Rizvi, 2000) to confirm onset date (Brown et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2020). Two studies ( $n = 2,027$ ) measured onset date using participant self-report (Beat, 2017; Schlegl et al., 2019), one ( $n = 285$ ) reported that this was 'assessed at admission' (Bühren et al., 2013), three ( $n = 1,298$ ) relied on young person and/or parental self-report (Kwok et al., 2019; Lieberman et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2015), and three ( $n = 503$ ) did not define how onset was determined (Andrés-Pepiñá et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2018; Nicholls et al., 2011). To measure the start of treatment, or end of DUED, six studies ( $n = 1,508$ ) used the date of entrance into specialised treatment (Andrés-Pepiñá et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Bühren et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2020; Kwok et al., 2019; Lieberman et al., 2019), five ( $n = 2,433$ ) used questionnaires (Beat, 2017; Neubaueur et al., 2014; Nicholls et al., 2011; Schlegl et al., 2019; Weigel et al., 2014), and three ( $n = 1,091$ ) did not explicitly define how start of treatment date was measured (Gumz et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2015).

### 3.2 | Length of DUED

#### 3.2.1 | Studies comparing DUED by diagnosis

##### *Anorexia nervosa*

Eleven studies explored the duration of untreated AN (Andrés-Pepiñá et al., 2019; Beat, 2017; Bühren et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2020; Gumz et al., 2018; Kwok et al., 2019; Lieberman et al., 2019; Neubaueur et al., 2014; Ng et al., 2018; Schlegl et al., 2019; Weigel et al., 2014). As shown in Figure 2, the average DUED in these studies ranged from 6.39 to 39.96 months, with a simple average of 29.9. Meta-analytic estimation found a mean DUED of 14.6 months (99% CI [5.1, 24.0]). Heterogeneity was high with  $I^2$  at 99% (95% CI [98.6, 99.1]). A sensitivity analysis was run excluding the Beat (2017) study ( $M = 11.4$ , 95% CI [4.5, 18.3],  $I^2 = 97.2\%$ , 95% CI [96.2, 97.9]).

##### *Bulimia nervosa*

A total of four studies assessed DUED for BN (Beat, 2017; Flynn et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2018; Schlegl et al., 2019). The average DUED ranged from 23.05 to 58.56 months, with a

TABLE 1 Study characteristics

Author, location	N	Sample	Design	Measures	Assessment of DUED	Components of DUED	Length DUED	Symptoms/clinical outcomes	Other findings/ comments
Studies in AN									
Andrés-Pepiñá et al., 2019 (Spain)	38	All females diagnosed with AN between 1987 and 1993 (age $M = 14.4$ years, $SD = 1.6$ ). At 22-year follow-up mean age was 37.03 ( $SD = 4.01$ ).	Retrospective, cohort	Questionnaires: EDI-2, BDI, ASQ Clinical interview: SCID-I	DUI: Time between illness onset and first contact with services. Onset: Not described.	N/A	$M = 13.05$ months ( $SD = 9.80$ ) Remission group $M = 8.4$ ( $SD = 8.4$ ) Current ED group $M = 18$ ( $SD = 10.8$ )	Longer DUED was significantly associated with an increased risk of ED status at 22-year follow-up ( $OR = 3.3$ ).	No other measured variables were significantly related to ED status at follow-up.
Bühren et al., 2013 (Germany)	285	All females between age 11 and 18 years old referred between 2001 and 2009. All diagnosed with AN (DSM-IV) with BMI below 10th percentile. Local sample-Aachen, Germany $n = 116$ (age $M = 15.2$ years, $SD = 1.7$ ), multisite sample $n = 127$ (age $M = 15.1$ years, $SD = 1.5$ ), included in both samples $n = 42$ (age $M = 15.6$ years, $SD = 1.5$ ).	Cross-sectional	Age-adjusted BMI scores	The time between beginning of weight loss and admission to hospital' (p. 396).	N/A	Local sample $M = 10.8$ months ( $SD = 8.2$ ) Multi-site sample $M = 11.1$ ( $SD = 8.6$ ) Included in both samples $M = 11.9$ ( $SD = 8.8$ )	DUED was not a significant influence on age-adjusted BMI at admission.	Older patients were significantly more likely to have a longer DUED and lower age-adjusted BMI at admission than younger patients.
Gunz et al., 2014; Gumz, Weigel, Wegscheider, Romer, & Löwe, 2018 (Germany)	77	Pre-intervention ( $n = 59$ ) and post intervention ( $n = 18$ ). All females between 10 and 60 years old ( $M = 22.2$ , $SD = 7.2$ ). All diagnosed with AN or atypical AN (DSM-IV). All receiving first ED-specific treatment.	Pre/post between-subjects intervention evaluation	Questionnaires: EDE-Q or Ch-EDE-Q, PHQ-9, GAD-7, date of first contact with healthcare. Clinical interview: SCID-I	DUI: Time between AN onset and initiation of ED-specific guideline-based treatment. Onset: Date when all AN criteria were first met.	DUC: Duration until first contact with healthcare system for ED related issues.	Pre-intervention $M = 36.5$ months ( $SD = 68.2$ ) Post-intervention $M = 40.1$ ( $SD = 89.4$ )	N/A	Intervention was a systemic public health intervention, no effect was found. GP/paediatrician was typically the first healthcare professional consulted about ED symptoms. Study is limited by small sample size.
Kwok, Kwok, Lee, & Tan, 2019 (Singapore)	435	Female ( $n = 415$ ) and male ( $n = 20$ ) adolescents between age 13 and 18 years old ( $M = 16.26$ , $SD = 1.85$ ). All diagnosed with AN (DSM-IV-TR) between January 1, 2003 and December 31, 2014. Child	Cross-sectional	Retrospective chart review: Sociodemographic, clinical characteristics, treatment details	Duration of illness prior to presentation	N/A	$M = 33.60$ months ( $SD = 34.32$ ) Childhood-onset $M = 57.0$ ( $SD = 64.68$ ) Adolescent onset $M = 31.44$ ( $SD = 29.40$ )	Those with childhood-onset had longer DUED than those with adolescent onset when presenting at adolescent ED services.	Those with childhood-onset had subsequently longer inpatient stays and more admissions.

(Continues)



TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author, location	N	Sample	Design	Measures	Assessment of DUED	Components of DUED	Length DUED	Symptoms/clinical outcomes	Other findings/comments
Neubauer et al., 2014 (Germany)	140	All females between 10 and 60 years old ( $M = 17.51$ , $SD = 5.81$ ). Early onset ( $\leq 14$ years) ( $n = 40$ ), intermediate onset (15–18 years) ( $n = 53$ ), late onset ( $> 19$ years) ( $n = 47$ ). All diagnosed with AN or subsyndromal AN (DSM-IV or ICD-10) with onset 1990 or later.	Cross-sectional	Questionnaires: EDE-Q or Ch-EDE-Q, PHQ-9, FTQ) Clinical interview: SCID-I	DUI: Time between onset and presentation to first ED-specific treatment. Onset: Date when all AN criteria were met simultaneously for the first time (or all criterion except one for subsyndromal AN)	N/A	$M = 25.14$ months ( $SD = 36.76$ ) Early onset $M = 38.35$ ( $SD = 45.92$ ) Intermediate onset $M = 20.57$ ( $SD = 31.97$ ) Late onset $M = 19.04$ ( $SD = 30.44$ )	N/A	Longer DUED was associated with internal rather than external motivation to initiate treatment. GP/paediatrician was typically the first to diagnose AN and provide ED-specific treatment information.
Weigel et al., 2014 (Germany)	58	All females between age 10 and 60 years old ( $M = 22.3$ , $SD = 7.8$ ). Adolescents $< 18$ years old ( $n = 19$ ), emerging adults 18–25 years old ( $n = 25$ ), adults $\geq 26$ years old ( $n = 14$ ). All diagnosed with AN or atypical AN (DSM-IV or provisional DSM-V).	Cross-sectional	Questionnaires: FTQ, PSSIK, sociodemographic Clinical interview: SCID-I	DUI: Time between date of illness onset and date of first treatment reported in FTQ. Onset: Date of illness onset reported in SCID-I.	N/A	$M = 31.8$ months ( $SD = 71.4$ ) Adolescents $M = 14.1$ ( $SD = 34.7$ ) Emerging adults $M = 20.7$ ( $SD = 24.8$ ) Adults $M = 83.2$ ( $SD = 122.9$ )	Significant predictors of longer DUED: Statutory health insurance, healthcare system-related factors (e.g. waiting times), low insight into the disorder, low self-motivation to initiate treatment, higher paternal education, having a romantic partner, separated parents, immigrant background, one-point lower BMI, and certain personality characteristics (depressive, rhapsodic, schizoid, obsessive-compulsive, paranoid, and dependent).	
<b>Studies in mixed diagnostic groups</b>									
Beat, 2017 (United Kingdom)	1,821	Female ( $n = 1,741$ ), male ( $n = 54$ ), non-binary ( $n = 18$ ),	Cross-sectional	Questionnaire (online self-report)	Time spent waiting for treatment.	Time waiting for treatment = 1. Time between symptom	$M = 39.24$ months ( $SD = 33.39$ )	N/A	Overall, those with AN had a shorter wait

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author, location	N	Sample	Design	Measures	Assessment of DUED	Components of DUED	Length DUED	Symptoms/clinical outcomes	Other findings/ comments
Brown et al., 2018; Fukutomi et al., 2020; McClelland et al., 2018 (United Kingdom)	142	Female ( $n = 139$ ) and male ( $n = 3$ ) aged 16–25 years old (control group: $M = 20.4$ , $SD = 2.0$ , treatment: $M = 20.4$ , $SD = 2.4$ ). Diagnosed ED ( $AN\ n = 57$ , $BN\ n = 42$ , $BED\ n = 5$ , $OSFED\ n = 38$ ). All with DUED $\leq 3$ years.	Historical controlled intervention study	Questionnaires: EDE-Q, CORE-10, DASS-21, WSAS, LEE, CIA Novel structured onset interview plus life chart (including items from the EDDS and EDE)	DUED: Time from onset to evidence-based treatment. Onset: The time at which DSM-5 criteria for an ED was first met.	onset and realising they had an ED, 2. Between realising and seeking help, 3. Between first GP visit and referral, 4. Between referral and assessment, 5. Between assessment and start of treatment.	AN $M = 34.54$ ( $SD = 30.39$ ) Between realising and BN $M = 55.06$ ( $SD = 36.42$ ) BED $M = 67.39$ ( $SD = 39.70$ ) Atypical $M = 42.40$ ( $SD = 36.02$ ) Children & adolescents: $M = 117.29$ ( $SD = 95.92$ ) Adults: $M = 246.74$ ( $SD = 163.92$ )	Treatment group had significant decrease in ED symptoms from 0 to 12 months with 70% below clinical cut-off by 12-months. Between assessment and treatment, BMI decreased in the audit group but increased in the treatment group.	time than those with other diagnoses. The longest component of DUED was the time between symptom onset and realisation of having an ED.
Flynn et al., 2020 (United Kingdom)	502	Female ( $n = 475$ ) and male ( $n = 27$ ) aged 16–25 years old ( $M = 20.56$ , $SD = 2.35$ ). All diagnosed with ED using criteria from DSM-5 ( $AN\ n = 233$ , $BN\ n = 131$ , $BED\ n = 9$ , $OSFED\ n = 129$ ) <sup>b</sup>	Cross-sectional	Questionnaires: EDE-Q, CORE-10, DASS-21, WSAS, LEE, CIA Clinical assessment Research interview (EDDS adapted for onset, life chart) BMI	DUED: Time from onset to evidence-based treatment. Onset: The time at which DSM-5 criteria for an ED were first met.	Time from onset to assessment.	TAU ( $n = 160$ ): $M = 19.98$ months, $SD = 11.13$ , $AN\ (n = 84)\ M = 18.57$ , $SD = 11.27$ , $BN\ (n = 42)\ M = 23.05$ , $SD = 9.35$ , $OSFED\ (n = 29)\ M = 19.90$ , $SD = 12.64$ Treatment ( $n = 272$ ): $M = 17.85$ , $SD = 10.38$ , $AN\ (n = 114)\ M = 17.50$ , $SD = 10.62$ , $BN\ (n = 68)\ M = 20.26$ , $SD = 10.45$ , $OSFED\ (n = 82),\ M = 16.30$ , $SD = 9.84$ Optimal treatment <sup>a</sup> ( $n = 153$ ): $M = 15.96$ , $SD =$	DUED was not related to BMI at assessment for those diagnosed with AN	DUED was successfully reduced using an early intervention model/ care pathway.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Author, location	N	Sample	Design	Measures	Assessment of DUED	Components of DUED	Length DUED	Symptoms/clinical outcomes	Other findings/comments
Lieberman, Houser, Voyer, Grady, & Katzman, 2019 (Canada)	106	Females ( $n = 88$ ) and males ( $n = 18$ ) between the ages of 8 and 13 years old ( $M = 11.27$ , $SD = 0.9$ ). All assessed between May 2013 and January 2017 and diagnosed using DSM-V with either AN ( $n = 77$ ) or ARFID ( $n = 29$ ).	Cross-sectional	Questionnaires: (CHEAT, EDI-C, CDI-2, MASC-2) Clinical interview: Unspecified	Duration of illness in months since onset Onset: Symptom onset	N/A	ARFID: $M = 29.28$ months ( $SD = 40.6$ ) AN: $M = 6.39$ months ( $SD = 4.7$ )	Children with ARFID had a significantly longer DUED than children with AN.	Patients with ARFID were significantly younger and more likely to be male.
Nicholls, Lynn, & Viner, 2011, (United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland)	208	Female ( $n = 171$ ) and male ( $n = 37$ ) aged 5–12 years old ( $M = 11.5$ , $SD = 1.3$ ). All diagnosed with ED using criteria modified from DSM-IV and ICD-10 (AN $n = 76$ , BN $n = 3$ , EDNOS $n = 89$ [including BED $n = 6$ ], 'other' ED $n = 40$ ).	Prospective, cohort	Questionnaires: Study-specific clinician questionnaire	DUI: Time between illness onset and presentation to secondary care Onset: Not described	N/A	$M = 8.3$ ( $SD = 7.0$ )	N/A	
Ng, Kuek, & Lee, 2018 (Singapore)	257	Female ( $n = 238$ ) and male ( $n = 19$ ) $\geq 12$ years old ( $M = 20.52$ , $SD = 7.14$ ). Diagnosed ED using DSM-IV (AN $n = 107$ , BN $n = 76$ , EDNOS $n = 74$ ).	Cross-sectional	Questionnaires: EDE-Q, CIA, demographic info	Not described	N/A	Total $M = 43.6$ months ( $SD = 63.0$ ) AN $M = 26.9$ ( $SD = 35.3$ ) BN $M = 57.8$ ( $SD = 57.4$ ) EDNOS $M = 53.0$ ( $SD = 89.2$ )	Those with AN had shorter DUED than those with BN or EDNOS.	
Schlegel et al., 2019 (Germany)	206	Females ( $n = 200$ ) and males ( $n = 6$ ) diagnosed using ICD-10 with AN ( $n = 140$ ) or BN ( $n = 66$ ). All between 12 and 58 years old at diagnosis (AN $M = 24.28$ , $SD = 7.74$ , BN $M = 25.35$ , $SD = 8.31$ ). Recruited	Cross-sectional	Specially created questionnaire including demographics, clinical characteristics, illness course	Treatment latency: From 1. Period from onset to start of treatment 2. Period from onset to treatment 3. Period from diagnosis (by GP) to treatment	From 1. Period from onset to diagnosis 2. Period from onset to treatment 3. Period from diagnosis (by GP) to treatment	$M = 48.24$ months, $SD = 64.32$ AN $M = 39.96$ ( $SD = 54.96$ ) BN $M = 58.56$ ( $SD = 70.68$ )	Those with AN had approx. 1.5 years shorter DUED than those with BN.	Age of onset did not differ between AN and BN. A BN diagnosis, a higher current age and not perceiving the eating disorder as a problem were significant predictors of a longer DUED latency.



**TABLE 1** (Continued)

Author, location	N	Sample	Design	Measures	Assessment of DUE	Components of DUE	Length DUE	Symptoms/clinical outcomes	Other findings/comments
Shu et al., 2015 (Australia)	757	Females ( $n = 704$ ) and males ( $n = 53$ ) under 18 years old (male $M = 13.57$ years [ $SD = 2.02$ ], female $M = 14.74$ years [ $SD = 1.56$ ]) diagnosed with ED using DSM-V (AN $n = 286$ , atypical AN $n = 179$ , BN $n = 71$ , BN low frequency/duration $n = 10$ , BED $n = 3$ , BED low frequency/duration $n = 5$ , purging disorder $n = 29$ , UFED $n = 174$ ).	Cross-sectional	EDE (adapted versions for child and parent informant)	Self-reported in medical assessment by parent and child.	N/A	Male DUE median = 9.00 months $\pm$ 5–12 Female DUE median = 8.00 $\pm$ 5–12	N/A	No significant difference in DUE between genders. Males had significantly earlier age of onset than females.

Abbreviations: AN, anorexia nervosa; ASQ, autism spectrum quotient; BDI, beck depression inventory; BED, binge eating disorder; BN, bulimia nervosa; CDI-2, children's depression inventory-2; ChEAT, children's eating attitudes test; Ch-EDE-Q, child eating disorder examination-questionnaire; CIA, clinical impairment assessment; CORE-10, ten-item version of clinical outcomes in routine evaluation; DASS-21, depression, anxiety, and stress scale 21; DUE, duration of untreated eating disorder; DUI, duration of untreated illness; DUSC, duration of untreated to specialist service contact; EAT, eating attitudes test; ED, eating disorder; EDDS, eating disorder diagnostic scale; EDE, eating disorder examination; EDE-Q, eating disorder examination-questionnaire; EDI-2, eating disorder inventory-2; EDI-C, eating disorder inventory for children; EDNOS, eating disorder not otherwise specified; FTQ, first treatment questionnaire; GAD-7, generalized anxiety disorder scale; GP, general practitioner; LEE, level of expressed emotion; MAEDS, multiaxial assessment of eating disorder symptoms; MASQ-2, multidimensional anxiety scale for children-2; OR, odd ratio; OSFED, other specified feeding or eating disorder; PHQ-9, patient health questionnaire; PSSIK, personality style and disorder inventory; SCID-IV, structured clinical interview for DSM-IV; WSAS, work and social adjustment scale.

<sup>a</sup>Included as a subgroup of the previous 'treatment' group.

<sup>b</sup>86 patients in the TAU condition were previously included in the study by Brown et al. (2018) and McClelland et al. (2018).

simple average of 53.0 months (see Supplementary Figure 1). Meta-analytic estimation found a mean DUED of 34.3 months (95% CI [3.6, 65.0]). Heterogeneity was high with  $I^2$  at 98% (95% CI [97.3, 99.0]). A sensitivity analysis was run excluding the Beat (2017) study ( $M = 26.6$ , 95% CI [-16.1, 69.4],  $I^2 = 96.7\%$ , 95% CI [93.2, 98.4]).

### Binge eating disorder

Only one study analysed DUED for BED (Beat, 2017), which revealed an average of 67.4 months ( $SD = 39.7$ ).

### OSFED/EDNOS

Three studies assessed DUED for OSFED/EDNOS (Beat, 2017; Flynn et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2018). As shown in Supplementary Figure 2, the average DUED ranged from 19.9 to 53.0 months with a simple average of 43.8. Meta-analytic estimation found a mean DUED of 29.5 months (95% CI [7.5, 51.6.0]). Heterogeneity was high with  $I^2$  at 95% (95% CI [89.2, 97.9]). A sensitivity analysis was run excluding the Beat (2017) study ( $M = 21.5$ , 95% CI [-20.1, 63.1],  $I^2 = 89.6\%$ , 95% CI [61.6, 97.2]).

## 3.2.2 | Studies comparing age at first treatment

As shown in Supplementary Figures 3 and 4, average DUED varies strongly between age groups. All studies reporting mean duration by age for either children

( $\leq 12$  years old) or adolescents/adults ( $\geq 12$  years old) at first treatment are included in these figures. The categories of adolescents and adults were collapsed, as several studies included participants both below and above 18 years of age. A simple mean DUED weighted by sample size was calculated for children (9.8 months) and adolescents/adults (34.7 months). Meta-analytic estimation found a mean of 7.5 months for children (95% CI, [4.8, 10.2],  $I^2 = 86.9\%$ , 95% CI [62.5, 95.4]), and 21.3 months (Supplementary Figure 4) for adolescents and adults (95% CI, [12.3, 30.3],  $I^2 = 96.0\%$ , 95% CI [92.9, 97.2]). DUED appears to increase with age.

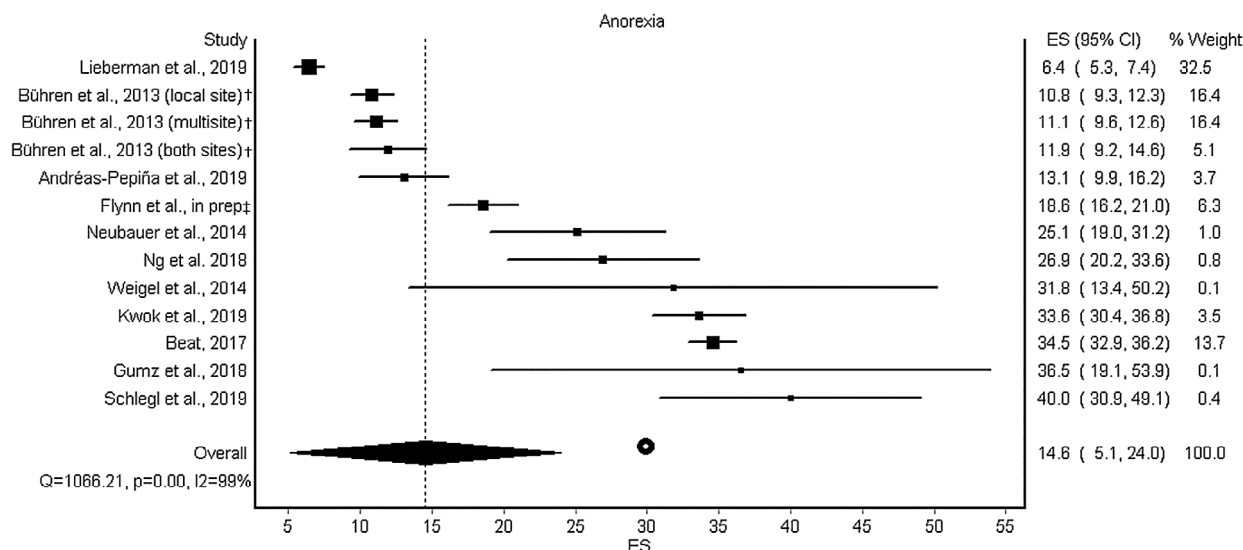
Two studies analysed DUED information for separate age groups at first treatment [child/adolescent vs. adults (Beat, 2017) and adolescents vs. emerging adults vs. adults (Weigel et al., 2014)]; again, DUED increase reflects an age increase.

## 3.2.3 | Studies comparing gender

One study examined the role of gender in DUED (Shu et al., 2015). Gender was not related to length of DUED in their paediatric population.

## 3.3 | Components of DUED

While all studies measured the time between illness onset and treatment, the component breakdown of this time



**FIGURE 2** Estimated DUED (in months) for anorexia using the inverse heterogeneity approach with point estimate for simple mean weighted by sample size

Circle indicates the point estimate for DUED as calculated using a simple mean weighted by sample size (29.9 months).

†Bühren et al. (2013) analysed participants in three separate groups: a local sample in Aachen, Germany, a multisite sample for those outside Aachen, and a third group for participants included in both samples. The corresponding author could not be reached to provide a combined analysis.

‡Denotes those in the treatment-as-usual (i.e., non-intervention) condition

varied (see Figure 3). Three studies explicitly identified components of DUED. Brown et al. (2018) measured DUED as the time of onset to the start of evidence-based treatment, defined as any treatment recommended by the NICE guidelines (NICE, 2017). One component of this was the duration until specialised service contact, which represents the time between illness onset and assessment.

Gumz et al. (2014) defined DUED similarly but included duration until first contact with any healthcare professional for eating related symptoms as a component. Schlegl et al. (2019) took a related approach by again measuring DUED from onset to treatment but further breaking this down into two distinct periods: pre and post general practitioner (GP) diagnosis.

One study (Beat, 2017) deconstructed DUED most thoroughly, breaking it down into several components: (i) the time before realisation of being ill; (ii) the time between

realisation and seeking help; (iii) time between first GP visit and referral; (iv) time between referral and assessment; and (v) time between assessment and start of treatment.

As can be seen in Figure 3, DUED can be conceptualised in different ways but in all cases broadly includes patient-related delays (i.e., time before seeking help) as well as service-related delays (i.e., time to starting treatment after seeking help).

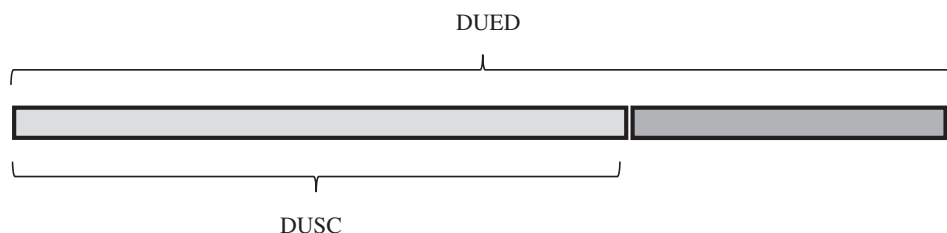
### 3.4 | Cross-sectional association with symptom severity

Bühren et al. (2013) investigated the role of DUED in children and adolescents with AN. These authors found that age-adjusted BMI was not significantly influenced by DUED. Flynn et al. (2020) investigated the role of DUED

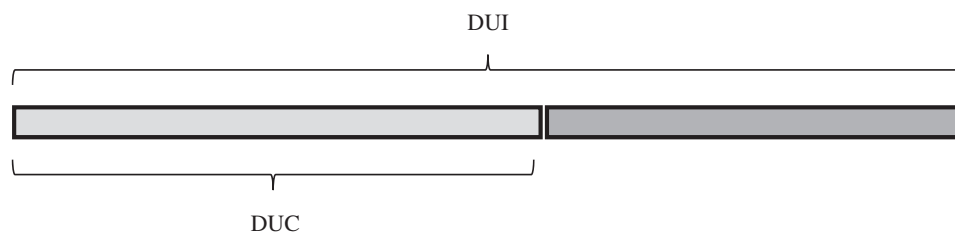
**FIGURE 3** Different conceptualisations of the putative components of DUED

DUED, Duration of untreated eating disorder (time from onset to evidence-based treatment); DUSC, duration until service contact (time from ED onset to assessment); DUI, duration of untreated illness (time from onset to initiation of ED-specific evidence-based treatment); DUC, duration until first contact with healthcare system for ED related issues (measured from onset). A, time before realising they had an eating disorder; B, time between realising they had an eating disorder and seeking help; C, time between first GP visit and referral; D, time between referral and assessment; and E, time between assessment and start of treatment

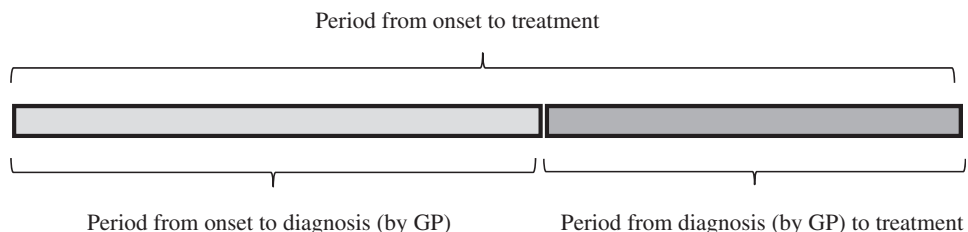
Brown et al., 2018:



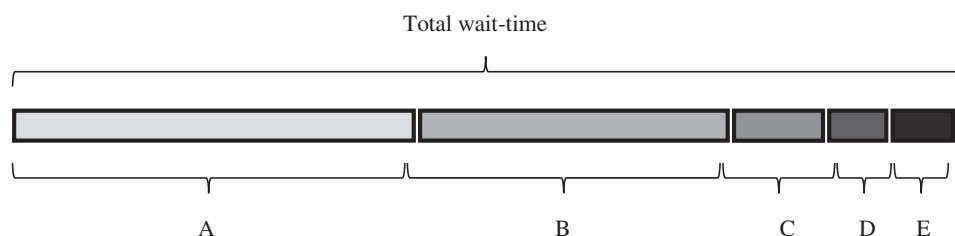
Gumz et al., 2018:



Schlegl et al., 2019:



Beat, 2017:



in emerging adults with a range of ED diagnoses. Base-line analysis of participants diagnosed with AN suggests that there was no significant relationship between DUED and BMI at assessment.

### 3.5 | Association with long-term clinical outcome

Andrés-Pepiñá et al. (2019) retrospectively investigated the long-term outcome of patients with AN an average of 22 years (range, 17–29) after initial diagnosis and treatment. Patients who still had an ED diagnosis at follow-up were significantly more likely to have had a longer DUED ( $M = 18$  months,  $SD = 10.8$ ) compared with those in remission ( $M = 8.4$  months,  $SD = 8.4$ ) with an odds ratio of 3.33 (95% CI: 1.3–8.7;  $p < .014$ ).

### 3.6 | Experimental manipulation of DUED

Using a pre-post design, a quasi-experimental study from the UK compared DUED following the introduction of an early intervention service model/care pathway for emerging adults with recent ED onset (FREED: First episode rapid early intervention for EDs) with that of similar patients (age, illness duration, diagnosis) previously having received treatment as usual (TAU) in the same service (Brown et al., 2018; McClelland et al., 2018). For details of the FREED model see Allen et al. (2020) and Supplementary Table 2. For patients able to access FREED under optimal conditions (i.e., without gate-keeping barriers) DUED was 6 months shorter than for TAU patients. Patients offered FREED took up treatment significantly more than those offered TAU (100% vs. 73%) and had significant improvement in ED and other symptoms over time. FREED participants diagnosed with AN on average gained weight between clinical assessment and start of treatment whereas the comparison group lost weight in the same interval. By 12 months, 59% of the FREED AN group had returned to normal BMI compared with only 17% of the TAU group. These improvements were maintained up to 24 months after start of treatment (Fukutomi et al., 2020). A second ongoing multi-centre study using a similar design found comparable reductions in DUED between participants receiving FREED under optimal conditions and those assigned to TAU (Flynn et al., 2020).

A study from Germany also used a pre-post design, to evaluate the impact of a multi-faceted public health intervention (including an awareness raising campaign, school-based prevention, treatment resources, and a

network of services providing early intervention) on DUED in AN patients of all ages across a large metropolitan catchment area (Gumz et al., 2018). There was no significant change in DUED from before ( $M = 36.5$  months,  $SD = 68.2$ ) to after ( $M = 40.1$ ,  $SD = 89.4$ ) the introduction of the intervention. There was also no significant difference between BMI and EDE-Q scores for the before and after participant samples.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

### 4.1 | Principal findings

The first aim of this review was to determine the typical length of DUED for different ED populations. Studies from seven countries indicate that, across different disorders, DUEDs are lengthy. Simple average DUED weighted by sample size ranged from 29.9 months for AN to 38.9 months for BN, with OSFED in between. A meta-analytic approach accounting for heterogeneity estimated a lower mean DUED, giving 14.6 months for AN, 34.3 months for BN, and 29.5 months for OSFED. The large difference between the mean weighted by sample size and the meta-analytic estimate weighted by inverse variance for AN is due to low variance in samples of younger patients. The meta-analytic estimate for AN highly weighted smaller studies with children, and younger age is a confounding factor for shorter DUED, thus lowering overall estimates for DUED. However, the simple average mean weighted by sample size did not devalue studies based on large variance, therefore giving just as much weight to outliers, and likely being more reflective of clinical reality.

The lengthy time periods as measured by simple average DUED found here appear longer than that found in a recent care pathway study from Italy (Volpe et al., 2019). This study found that this took approximately 26 months across disorders. These patients did not necessarily have a first episode of their ED and it is likely that during a later illness episode patients may ask for help more quickly.

Our findings, both within study comparisons (Beat, 2017; Weigel et al., 2014) and cross study comparisons (Supplementary Figures 3 and 4), suggest that there is variability in DUED relating to age, with a younger age relating to a shorter DUED. This age-related increase in length of DUED is likely to be related to several factors. First, the younger the child the more likely the parents are able to identify the illness earlier. Longer DUED as age increases may be explained by living independently, leaving the individual in charge of seeking help and navigating the health care system. In addition, despite the fact that peak onset of EDs ranges from age 15 to 25 (Schmidt,

Adan, et al., 2016), many countries have separate child/adolescent and adult ED services, which may add to delays and disruptions in accessing first episode specialist mental health care. Second, studies of younger participants tend to mainly include AN, which is a highly visible disorder, whereas studies of adults often include a mixture of AN and those with bulimic EDs, which are more hidden. For example, parents are often unaware of bulimic symptoms in their adolescent children (Bartholdy et al., 2017). Third, it may also matter who reports on DUED. Where parents report DUED, a self-serving bias may be operative, that is, with parents not wishing to admit they left symptoms unchallenged for a period of time. Conversely, where DUED is defined by patients, an 'effort after meaning' bias may mean that people date the onset of their symptoms back to mild body image concerns.

Average DUED weighted by sample size found here for children was 9.8 months (see Figure 3). DUEDs for adolescents and adults ( $M = 34.7$ ) were longer than duration of illness in recent large-scale clinical trials in adolescents with EDs [e.g., AN: Agras et al., 2014 13.5 months; Hodsoll et al., 2017 median 12–15 months; Eisler et al., 2016 9.6–11.4 months; Herpertz-Dahlmann et al., 2014 9.8–12.4 months; BN: Le Grange, Lock, Agras, Bryson, & Jo, 2015 18.4–19.6 months; Schmidt et al., 2007 2.5–2.6 years] and shorter than in trials in adults [e.g., AN: Attia et al., 2019 10.5–12.6 years; Schmidt et al., 2015 8.3 years; BN/EDNOS/BED: Fairburn et al., 2009 9.9 years; BED: de Zwaan et al., 2017 7.9–10.4 years]. While this is certainly due in part to the conflation of the average DUED for adolescents and adults, there is still another factor: DUED measures time to first treatment whereas duration of illness measures time to current treatment, including any previous treatments. For the majority of adolescents, this likely constitutes their first ever treatment.

The second aim of this review was to delineate components of DUED. The evidence suggests that the largest delays are patient-related (i.e., from start of illness to help-seeking; see Figure 3). Likewise, in the Italian care pathway study by Volpe et al. (2019), the larger component delay was prior to starting help-seeking. Nonetheless, the time between help-seeking and accessing specialist care was substantial (28 weeks).

These findings have implications for early intervention programmes. Waiting for weeks or months from the point of help-seeking is distressing. As such, reducing service-related delays is important. These efforts need to be joined with attempts to intervene earlier, for example, through indicated prevention in high-risk groups.

In relation to our third aim, overall, studies failed to find cross-sectional associations between BMI at the commencement of treatment and length of DUED (Bühren et al., 2013; Flynn et al., 2020). This may be explained by the limited variability in DUED in these two studies. However, the Bühren et al. (2013) study found that older adolescents had a longer DUED and lower age-adjusted BMI at admission than younger adolescents, which the authors attributed to a lessening of parental influence on older teens.

The fourth aim of the review was to investigate the relationships of DUED and long-term clinical outcomes. Andrés-Pepiñá et al.'s (2019) retrospective study suggests that a longer DUED may play a role in persistence of AN many years after initial treatment. No other studies assessed the influence of DUED on long-term clinical outcomes, and thus these findings cannot be generalised to the wider group of patients with EDs, although they do bolster the rationale for early intervention.

The final aim was to investigate experimental manipulations of DUED. Three studies, all using pre-post designs, attempted this, one through an ambitious public health intervention (Gumz et al., 2018). The other two attempted to reduce DUED through a novel service intervention (FREED) designed to reduce service related delays in specialist ED services in the UK (Flynn et al., 2020; McClelland et al., 2018). For details of the FREED model, see Allen et al. (2020) and Supplementary Table 2. The public health intervention did not reduce DUED, whereas the novel service intervention did reduce DUED by several months. Clinical outcomes (weight recovery) for FREED patients with AN were much better than for those receiving TAU with differences in rate of improvement maintained up to 24 months (Fukutomi et al., 2020). This evidence suggests that FREED is a promising early intervention model for reducing DUED across all EDs, and for improving clinical outcomes in AN. Its impact on clinical outcomes in other EDs is yet to be demonstrated. By contrast, efforts to intervene with a prominent focus on prevention of onset of AN and/or raising awareness about early help seeking may not be enough to reduce DUED, as indicated by the disappointing findings of Gumz et al. (2018). Similarly, indicated prevention efforts focusing exclusively on AN have also had disappointing results (Jacobi et al., 2018).

## 4.2 | Strengths and limitations

A strength of this review is that it assesses DUED across different EDs, and as such provides a benchmark for future research, clinical practice, and health policy. The



data included were from a range of countries with different health care systems, yet findings seemed to be consistent, and thus appear generalisable across high-income Western countries.

This review also has several limitations. First, the search excluded articles not written in English, Portuguese, or German and many types of grey literature. Second, DUED was not operationalised in the same way across studies. Studies differed markedly in their definitions of illness onset and treatment start. A recent systematic review on the duration of untreated psychosis (DUP) cited similar difficulties with heterogeneous definitions of DUP (Oliver et al., 2018). This suggests that other mental health fields, even those in a more advanced stage of research on duration of untreated illness, are facing similar problems. Likewise, the components of DUED have been conceptualised differently by different authors (see Figure 3). For example, Pinhas, Wong, and Woodside (2014) have segmented DUED into several components for both mental and physical health pathways and have also taken into consideration the role of duration of untreated ED to first psychotropic medication (DUPMed) as being a relevant period of time, but do not provide any data.

Third, we were not able to separate out the influence of age at presentation and diagnosis, given very limited data on children and adolescents with bulimic EDs. Finally, the variable of DUED may be confounded by other factors. Research in psychosis lists the following potential confounders: mode-of-onset, pre-morbid functioning, and acuteness of illness at assessment (Sullivan et al., 2018). These variables may also affect DUED.

### 4.3 | Implications for research, practice, and policy

Future studies should aim to adopt a common definition of DUED, including its components, and standardised measurement tools. For research purposes it is desirable to use in-depth interview measures allowing retrospective assessment of symptoms, anchored in key autobiographical events. This methodology has been tested across many different disorders (e.g., depression: Brown, Adler, & Bifulco, 1988; psychosis: Bebbington et al., 1993; EDs: Schmidt, Tiller, Blanchard, Andrews, & Treasure, 1997). These studies show that, given biographical anchoring, such details can be accurately remembered going back many years. We used an adapted version of this methodology in our studies, using a graph to create a timeline incorporating patient life events and details of the illness course (Brown et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2020). However, this methodology is time consuming and less useful for routine clinical practice. We have

developed an abbreviated assessment of DUED for clinical practice. Any such assessment tools should also try to delineate the components of DUED, as this would inform decisions about when it is best to intervene.

In terms of clinical practice and policy, long DUEDs across different countries with different health care systems suggest that we are nowhere near achieving early intervention. In psychosis, early intervention efforts have been organised around shortening DUP as a key outcome. This requires routine measurement of this variable. Likewise, it would be helpful to routinely measure DUED.

The longest component of DUED is the time before seeking help. Measures to improve early detection of EDs may help to shorten this period. A second key component of DUED is the time people wait between seeking help (e.g., in the UK an appointment with their GP) and starting specialist treatment. In England, there are nationally binding waiting times targets for EDs in young people below age 18 (Department of Health, 2014). In parallel, self-referrals to specialist services are now allowed for under 18s (NCCMH, 2015). These measures have successfully increased the proportion of under 18s with EDs starting specialist treatment (NHS England, 2019).

It is expected that similar waiting time targets will be brought in for adults in the UK (NCCMH, 2019). These are important steps for shortening DUED. However, measurement of waiting times alone is not sufficient, as a substantial proportion of young people are referred between services (e.g., child to adult services) without ever starting specialist treatment.

Emerging data suggest that a service model/care pathway, such as FREED, can successfully reduce DUED, improve clinical outcomes, and appears to be cost-effective (Brown et al., 2018; McClelland et al., 2018).

### 4.4 | Conclusion

This systematic review is the first to examine DUED across different EDs. Whilst definitions and measurement of DUED and its components vary between studies, there is agreement across different studies internationally that average DUEDs are long, ranging from about two and a half years (for AN) to nearly 6 years (for BED). DUED appears to be shorter in children than in adolescents and adults. Preliminary evidence suggests DUED may be a modifiable factor effecting outcome in EDs. Taken together, these data provide a useful benchmark for early intervention efforts in EDs. To accurately determine the role of DUED, definition and measurement must be uniformly operationalised.



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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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