

PERCEIVED NEEDS AND PATIENT SATISFACTION IN RELATION TO ADOLESCENT HEALTH CARE

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents have developmental characteristics and health care needs that are quite distinct from those of children or adults. They are unique both in the nature of their problems and as reluctant consumers of traditional health services. Providing developmentally appropriate health care to young people presents a number of challenges. Not only must health care providers be professionally skilled and knowledgeable, but they must also be sensitive to how threatening and confusing health care systems can appear to vulnerable young people.

Satisfaction with care has a strong influence on the seeking of health care compliance with treatment and ongoing relationships with health care providers. It is not possible to effectively plan, implement or evaluate programs of care for young people without consulting the experts - young people themselves!

The Adolescent Unit at Westmead Hospital has undertaken a series of needs assessments and patient satisfaction surveys to ensure that services provided are adolescent friendly and effective. The surveys have explored:

- 1) young people's ideas of an 'ideal' health care service for young people and
- 2) in relation to the Adolescent Unit at Westmead Hospital, young people and family/caregiver's experiences of access, environment, waiting times and overall level of satisfaction with the service.

The results of these surveys, which have been used to improve the quality of some of services offered to adolescents and their families, will be presented.

THE WESTMEAD ADOLESCENT UNIT

Westmead Hospital is the major adult tertiary referral hospital for Western Sydney as well as being a major teaching hospital affiliated with the University of Sydney. The first Adolescent Medicine ward in Australia was commissioned at Westmead Hospital and opened in May 1983. The hospital-based adolescent inpatient ward currently includes 19 beds dedicated for young people aged between 14 and 24 years of age who present with a variety of medical, surgical and psychosocial problems requiring inpatient admission. The adolescent ward is complemented with outpatient clinics and a newly established eating disorders day stay program.

The adolescent unit has a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate approach to health care. Services include traditional mainstream medical interventions, individual and family counselling, creative and artistic programs for patients, group therapy programs for patients and support groups for parents. A high school administered by the Department of School Education is also located on the ward. These services are provided by a comprehensive, multidisciplinary team which consists of adolescent paediatricians and physicians, clinical nurse consultant, nursing staff in adolescent health care, social worker, psychologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist and school teachers. In addition to direct patient care, the adolescent team is involved in youth advocacy, research, education, training and health promotion.

This comprehensive, integrated and developmentally appropriate approach to health is considered essential for providing holistic and age appropriate care for young people. As well as managing complex biopsychosocial illnesses such as eating disorders and chronic fatigue syndrome, the adolescent team provides a transition service for young people with chronic illnesses who graduate from child-based services to the adult-based hospital system. Because adolescence is a uniquely challenging period of life, different to both childhood and adult life, specific services that are relevant to this age is essential.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence is a unique period characterised by major physical, cognitive and psychosocial development. Adolescence is a time of rapid physical development, and bodily changes become apparent as children grow and physically develop through puberty. These rapid changes in body shape and appearance lead to a redefinition of body image and this is one of the tasks of adolescents (1). Other major developmental tasks during adolescence include attaining autonomy from parents and other adults, the development of sexual identity, development of peer group relations, exploring and making vocational and educational lifestyle choices, and developing value systems and codes of ethics. Young people at a subconscious level generally achieve these developmental tasks without awareness of having done so. However, their vulnerability to a myriad of stresses, particularly chronic illness, can often impede their mastery of these tasks. The need for hospital services for adolescents with a chronic illness is increasing with longer term survival rates for many chronic childhood illnesses. Because of the effect on physical, emotional, social and spiritual functioning, adolescents with a chronic illness are particularly vulnerable (2,3). They have an increased risk for adjustment problems and behaviour problems (4), body image problems, alienation from peers, anxiety and depression and decreased self-esteem. They have fears, which relate to loss of control, being different from peers, and dying (5).

We know that, for various reasons, adolescents with a chronic illness are at risk of loss to follow-up and non-compliance with optimal medical management. Satisfaction with care has a prime influence on the seeking of health care advice, compliance with treatment and maintenance of continuing positive relationships with health providers. As adolescents tend to underutilise health services, it is particularly important that available services promote patient satisfaction by ensuring that care provided is age appropriate, holistic and acceptable to young people.

PATIENT SATISFACTION

Patient satisfaction as an outcome measure has become an important quality management activity. In an effort to ensure that services provided are meeting the needs of young people, the Adolescent Unit at Westmead Hospital is strongly committed to involving young people in the planning, development and evaluation of both inpatient and outpatient services. The Association for the Welfare of Child Health (6) also strongly advocates continuous evaluation and quality improvements in health care services for both children and adolescents.

By performing regular 'snapshot' patient satisfaction surveys of both inpatient and outpatient services, the Adolescent Unit at Westmead Hospital has attempted to evaluate services on an ongoing basis, and institute appropriate changes to meet more effectively the identified holistic health care needs of young people.

Outpatient satisfaction survey:

Aim: The aim of the outpatient surveys is to investigate adolescent's, and their family/care giver's satisfaction with the care they received in the Department of Adolescent Medicine Ambulatory Clinics at Westmead Hospital. Specifically, the project seeks to explore young people's and family/caregiver's experiences of (a) access to the service, (b) environment within the service, (c) waiting times, (d) care and concern shown by the health care provider and (e) overall level of satisfaction with the consultation.

Methodology: All adolescents and their families/caregivers who attended the general adolescent Ambulatory Clinics (excluding family therapy sessions) are invited to participate in the prospective studies which are attended twice each year. Whilst the actual survey questions are the same, separate survey forms are used to differentiate between responses from young people and responses from parents/caregivers. Anonymity is assured and participants are asked to deposit completed forms in a collection box as they leave the clinics

Instruments: The tools consist of previously piloted Westmead Adolescent Outpatient survey questionnaires. The format and wording of these forms is purposely simplistic to cater for literacy levels and to facilitate response rates, particularly from young people. Using a five point Likert scale these questionnaires examine satisfaction with:

- (a) access to the service
- (b) environment within the service
- (c) waiting times
- (d) care and concern shown by the health care provider
- (c) overall level of satisfaction with the consultation

Comments are invited and opportunity provided for adolescent and family feedback in regard to any other aspects of the Adolescent Ambulatory Clinics that participants may wish to comment upon.

Inpatient satisfaction survey:

Similarly, in order to obtain a snapshot view of patient's perception of nursing care on the adolescent ward at Westmead Hospital, patient satisfaction surveys are attended twice each year.

Methodology: All adolescent inpatients up to 21 years of age, discharged from the adolescent ward during the survey periods, are invited (by the ward clerk during office hours and nursing staff out-of-hours) to complete the questionnaire. Anonymity is assured and patients are asked to deposit completed forms in a collection box as they leave the ward.

Instrument: The design of the inpatient questionnaire is also purposely simple to cater for varying literacy levels and to encourage response rates from young people. The inpatient questionnaire consists of 12 'circle the best response' questions and 4 'comment' questions. The first two questions relate to frequency and length of hospitalisation. Ten questions relate to the adolescent's perception of nursing care and ward activities. The remaining questions ask for (a) suggestions for the ward information brochure, (b) comments regarding the patient's care and stay in hospital and (c) suggestions for how care on the ward might be improved.

Results of Surveys:

The results generally reflect that Westmead Hospital provides a high standard of age-appropriate care, which is acceptable to and highly regarded by, both young people and their families/caregivers. The actual survey tools used and the statistical results of the surveys will be presented in more depth at the meeting.

Briefly, some of the comments from young people attending the outpatient clinics have reflected issues of concern to them such as the importance of warm attentive reception staff, feeling that they have been listened to, feeling comfortable in waiting areas with appropriate diversional activities, feeling that they re talked 'with' and not 'to', feeling that they are not being judged and getting answers that they understand to questions they ask.

Similarly, comments from parents attending the outpatient clinics with their adolescent children have reflected issues of concern to them such as the importance of having appointments outside school times whenever possible so that adolescents do not miss too much school, maintaining a caring, relaxed and encouraging atmosphere in the clinics, having trust and faith in the treating clinician, feeling listened to and having issues of concern clarified in a 'non-rushed way', having appointments kept to time, receiving practical advice rather than academic jargon, wise counsel and humour, having the opportunity for involvement, but also time for the adolescent to see the clinician on their own.

Comments from young people hospitalised on the adolescent ward have reflected issues of concern to them such as the importance of having peer contact to reduce the sense of alienation and difference; access to entertainment and diversional activities; food that is not 'boring'; a friendly, bright and comfortable atmosphere that is not 'too clean'; fun; being consulted and feeling in control rather than having decisions made for you, and having your opinion listened to 'because we know best how we feel'.

Action is taken on these surveys by discussing results with staff and implementing appropriate quality improvements to ensure age-appropriate, holistic care is consistently provided for patients within the adolescent ward, Westmead Hospital. Areas of outstanding performance are also highlighted to staff as positive feedback for significant effort.

CONCLUSION

Satisfaction with care is a prime influence on the seeking of health care, compliance with treatment and maintenance of a continuing positive relationship with health care providers. The unique nature of adolescents necessitates ongoing evaluation as an essential part of hospital-based adolescent services to ensure that services are acceptable, accessible and efficient.

Programs imposed on young people, without their input into the planning, implementation and evaluation are generally meeting the needs of the adults imposing them rather than the actual health care needs identified by young people. If young people are consulted in partnership regarding their own health care needs they are more likely to value the services provided and more likely to comply with optimal medical management. It is our firm belief that effective, age-appropriate intervention for the youth of today will prevent significant morbidity in the adult of tomorrow.

References:

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