

Involving Primary Care Physicians (General Practitioners) in HIV Care in the United Kingdom – What the Doctors say.



The UK National Strategy on Sexual Health and HIV has indicated that General Practitioners should become involved in the care of people with HIV. This will involve offering HIV testing and counselling. Although such a move may go some way to normalising HIV and arguably reduce some of the stigma associated with it, little attention appears to have been paid to the view of GPs regarding this. In addition, no consideration appears to have been given as to how such services will be funded or the ways in which GPs are often prevented from giving proper care to their patients with HIV.

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Description

Two studies were conducted by PatientView in which they asked GPs in London with an interest in HIV to outline the kind of work they engage in with their patients and give their views on taking more responsibility for their care.

Study 1

- 37 London-based GP Practices took part in the research.
- Questionnaire posted to all respondents.
- Asked general questions about treatment options for patients with HIV.
- Offered the opportunity to take part in second study.

Study 2

- 20 GP Practices selected for this study, 18 of which participated.
- Recruitment largely through Study 1 although in a few instances, GP Practices opted for Study 2 only.
- Face-to-face interviews using a detailed questionnaire.

Questionnaire combined questions on HIV-related medical services with other topical issues such as:

- The relationship between the GP and their patients with HIV
- The extent of co-operation between GPs and Specialist Clinics
- The adherence needs of patients with HIV
- Confidentiality issues at GP Practices for patients with HIV
- The need for GP training in HIV care

Lessons Learnt

The number of patients with HIV registered in GP Practices varies considerably across London, ranging from 1 to over 100. In all cases, GPs were keen to be involved in the treatment and care of patients with HIV and contrary to patients with more general healthcare needs, were happy to accept new patients with HIV. Most GP Practices managed the care of their patients with HIV in conjunction with specialist clinics.

The majority of GPs were willing to provide screening facilities to patients with HIV. A number of GPs felt uneasy about prescribing HIV medication due to lack of expertise in the area.

Caring for Patients with HIV:

GP Practices v. Specialist Clinics

Most GPs (65%) felt that patients preferred to receive HIV treatment in specialist HIV clinics rather than at the GP Practice. Reasons for this ranged from a belief that patients saw specialist clinicians as more informed on HIV treatment issues, to a view that patients found the open access of HIV clinics more convenient than having to make appointments with their GP. As a result of this, most GPs felt that patients with HIV would be unlikely to use GP Practices for the management of their HIV.

In addition, most GP Practices felt that patients with HIV no longer represented 'special cases' over and above the general patient population.

GPs' Relationships with HIV Clinics

Although most GPs were happy with the relationship they had with HIV Clinics, around 40% felt that in some cases HIV Clinics were unwilling to share patient data, even with the GPs themselves, and even where patients themselves had requested it.

If GPs were to become more involved in the treatment and care of their patients with HIV, it is important that the relationship between HIV Clinics and GP Practices improve. Whereas GPs recognised that Clinicians held expertise around HIV treatments, there was a need for Clinicians to recognise the expertise held by GPs in managing the day-to-day healthcare needs of their patients.

Dealing with Drug Adherence

Most GPs felt that the responsibility for ensuring that patients with HIV adhered to treatment lay with Specialist Clinics. However, in almost 70% of cases, GPs did offer professional advice to their patients with HIV regarding this, usually through encouraging them to discuss their treatment with their GP. A small number of GP Practices monitored drug adherence via tablet counting through Pharmacy records.

Concerns around Confidentiality in GP Practices

In over half of the GP Practices, it was noted that all or some of their patients with HIV had expressed concerns about the ability of GP Practices to guarantee confidentiality. However, in most cases, the GPs felt that there were no problems in ensuring the confidentiality of their patients with HIV. The exception to this was around the release of patient information to insurers where a third of all respondents felt that patients with HIV should be "very worried" and a further 22 per cent felt patients should have "some concern" over this.

Recommendations

GP Practices in London are keen to become more involved in the treatment of patients with HIV, albeit in conjunction with HIV Specialists. However, there is general recognition that for many patients with HIV, the preference will be to receive HIV treatment and care from specialist centres rather than in GP Practices.

If GPs are to become more effective in managing the care and treatment of their patients with HIV, their relationship with HIV Specialists and Support Groups must be further developed. In addition, there may be a need for GPs to receive specialist training around HIV treatment issues to ensure that they feel confident in advising on this.

Finally, the concerns of patients with HIV around confidentiality must be addressed, particularly in relation to Insurance Companies gaining access to patient records.