Foundations to support adolescents in managing their medicines

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Adolescence is a challenging period of transition. Gaining independence and increased responsibility for decision making are key characteristics that define adolescence. Managing medicines, independently and responsibly, is an extra burden facing adolescents with a long-term condition (LTC). How can healthcare professionals help adolescent patients successfully manage their medicines during this crucial period of life?

Balancing the 'scales of support'
Primarily, adolescents need to be adequately supported to acquire the skills required to become competent at managing their medicines. Healthcare professionals have to continually identify and correctly judge the level of support adolescents need, taking into account the changeable levels of support the adolescent will be receiving from 'others' such as parents, carers and/or peers. However, this task can be made more manageable by establishing some initial foundations.

Laying the foundation
In the latter part of the first decade of life, age-appropriate basic messages that can be understood by a child about disease diagnosis and treatment should be communicated. In the second decade of life, where complex abstract thinking has developed, these messages may then be delivered in more detail. Providing a clear and simple explanation of primary and secondary care services as important settings that offer support for managing LTCs may serve as a useful start. Following this, the role of healthcare professionals found in hospitals, general practices and community pharmacies should be explained.

With this context in place the practicalities of managing medicines can be discussed. Opportunities for real-life experience of booking and attending a GP appointment, ordering a prescription and visiting a pharmacy to have a prescription dispensed must be an integral part of this learning process. Grasping this type of foundational knowledge would be valuable to 'school age' adolescents whether or not they have a LTC.

Building on the foundation
The arrival of autumn for healthcare professionals working in close proximity of a university will be marked by a massive influx of students. A significant number will include adolescent patients leaving the family home for the first time. This transition will force them to take more responsibility for managing their medicines.

Before an adolescent leaves the family home it would be helpful if doctors could spend time helping them to identify GP surgeries they could register with when they arrive at university. Likewise, locating community pharmacies in the proximity of their place of residence and, for instance, those that offer services such as late-night opening can be encouraged. Ideally, adolescents should arrive at university with an adequate supply of prescribed medicines to cover the first few weeks of term.

Upon arrival at university, healthcare professionals should try to meet the new adolescent patients to assess their medicine management skills and agree on what further support may be needed. Adolescent patients may find it beneficial to be offered additional opportunities to discuss new challenges that arise as they progress through university. Providing guidance on accessing healthcare services when the adolescent patient returns to the family home during holidays would enable a seamless transition of care.

Multidisciplinary team
Establishing a robust foundation to support adolescents in successfully managing their medicines requires a multidisciplinary team. Pharmacists are medicines specialists located within the community, general practice and hospital settings. Therefore, their contribution in shaping programmes of work to support adolescent patients is vital.

Current initiatives such as medicines optimisation and a recent call for research focussing on improving management of LTCs in children and young people, provide an exciting opportunity to explore the intricacies of how pharmacists and other healthcare professionals can work together to best support adolescents in their use of medicines.

References

Declaration of interests
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