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Early intervention for youth mental health and substance use disorders: the role of the GP

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Title: Early Intervention for Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders: the Role of the GP.

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Background: Mental and substance use disorders are common among young adults, especially in deprived urban areas. Primary care may be well-placed to enable their early identification and treatment. However despite frequent interaction with general practice, young people may be reluctant to contact their GP, or even recognise them as a source of help when experiencing mental health problems. This paper aims to determine the role of the GP in addressing mental and substance use disorders among young people in deprived urban settings from the perspectives of *both* healthcare providers and young people.

Methods: Qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with healthcare professionals (n=37) and young people (n=20) from primary care, secondary care and community agencies which interact with primary care, and reflect the range of settings where young adults seek help for mental and substance use disorders. An inductive thematic approach to analysis, using 'NVivo 9', was performed.

Results: *GP role and approach* emerged as a key over-arching theme across both data sets in regards to barriers and enablers associated with help-seeking and enablers to early intervention for mental and substance use disorders. In terms of help-seeking, barriers included: young people not identifying GPs as a source of support for people with mental health issues, consent and confidentiality issues, perceived shame associated with stigma of discussing such problems with a GP who may be familiar and prior negative experiences with GPs. Where early intervention is concerned, the majority of healthcare providers and young people recognised the GP as a first point of contact, a source of information and a link to other agencies, however barriers to early intervention included: inappropriate and ineffective GP referrals, lack of training in mental health, and limited time to address mental health issues in consultations.

Conclusions: General practice is central to early intervention for youth mental health, particularly in deprived areas. Promoting awareness of mental health and the role of the GP in helping these issues, education of practitioners, and improving access to psychological treatments and for young people with more complex morbidity and specialist care are likely to be the key domains of such an intervention.

Abstract Category: Health Services and Population Health Research Category