



Health Providers Can Improve Adolescents' Health Care Experiences

The period of adolescence sets the behavior, habits, and often the life-style—healthy or unhealthy—for adulthood. So it is critical for this age group to make routine health services a part of their lives. While most of the nation's nearly 42 million adolescents (aged 10-19) are healthy, many young people participate in risky behavior or develop unhealthy habits. And far too many are overweight or obese, have mental health problems, or have serious or chronic conditions that jeopardize their health.

Health providers play an important role in promoting healthy behavior, preventing disease, and managing chronic conditions. In order to successfully engage young people in health promotion, prevention, and treatment services, however, providers must be equipped with an understanding of and expertise in addressing the specific developmental and health issues of adolescence.

Adolescents may enter the health care system through various pathways. Physicians, dentists, nurses, nutritionists, psychologists, social workers, and coaches, among others, often confront and need to address a young person's health needs. A competent interdisciplinary workforce that is prepared and willing to meet adolescents' health needs can improve the delivery and quality of services, as well as expand access to all levels and types of health providers for adolescents. In order to fulfill that role, adolescent health care providers need education and training to successfully provide services for adolescents—services that are accessible, acceptable, appropriate, effective, and equitable.

Knowledge of Adolescent Health Problems

Current health service settings in the United States are not specifically designed to meet the myriad health needs of adolescents. Instead, the focus of health services is

frequently on the delivery of acute care for conditions, such as infections and injuries, or addressing specific problems or needs, such as contraception or substance use. Surveys show that health care providers are dissatisfied with the level of training in adolescent health, as education programs fail to teach many core competencies: this lack of training is not surprising given that only one month of adolescent health



"None of my doctors really ever asked me 'Are you doing drugs, are you drinking, do you have issues with this?' It was just like, do the physical, get the waiver signed and that was it."

Natalya was addicted to methamphetamine and crack cocaine during adolescence. Her annual physical check-ups were missed opportunities for detection of her dependency. She felt she could not confide in her physician or others in the health care system, and no one in the system asked her about her behavior or motivated her to discuss her problems.

She overcame her addiction through enrollment in a community-based chemical dependency treatment program that was welcoming and comfortable to her.

Natalya plans on staying clean and sober, but perhaps she could have been helped earlier by a knowledgeable and compassionate health provider.

is required in a three-year pediatric residency. Specifically, providers report inadequate training in areas such as oral health, sexual and reproductive health, eating and weight problems, psychological problems, substance abuse, sports medicine, violence, and psychological assessment. Yet these are the issues that frequently need the most attention in caring for adolescents. All providers who serve adolescents should be trained about the nature of adolescents' health problems, and they should be able to offer a range of effective strategies for risk assessment, disease prevention, care coordination, treatment, and health promotion. Providers also have an opportunity to incorporate prevention and wellness in their health visits with adolescents, as well as to identify risky behaviors when providing routine health services.

Skills to Interact and Engage With Adolescents

Young people are best served by health providers who understand the key developmental features and the overall social environment of adolescents. Health providers can play an important role in helping adolescents set the pattern for healthy adulthood. Yet health care services are frequently not designed to be adolescent friendly, and health providers often lack both specialized training and the necessary skills to interact successfully with this age group. Important skills include how to relate to adolescents and gain their trust and cooperation, how to develop strong provider-patient relationships, and how to identify early signs of risky and unhealthy behaviors that may require further assessment, intervention, or referral. Health care providers also need special skills to work with the most vulnerable adolescents— young people who are in the foster care system, homeless, in families that have recently immigrated to the United States, or in the juvenile justice system, as well as those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. Also critical to successfully delivering health services to adolescents is the recognition by providers that lack of confidentiality (or perceived lack of confidentiality) in services deters some adolescents from seeking or using services.

For More Information

This summary was prepared by the Institute of Medicine/ National Research Council, based on the report, *Adolescent Health Services: Missing Opportunities*, and the DVD produced in conjunction with that report, both of which were products of the Committee on Adolescent Health Services. Copies of the report are available for sale from the National Academies Press (NAP) at 888-624-8373 or 202-334-3313 or via the NAP homepage www.nap.edu. Full text of the report and a free PDF copy of the Summary are also available at www.nap.edu. The DVD can be viewed at www.bocycf.org/ahc.html.

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Health Providers Are One Piece of a Coordinated Effort

Although no one model of health services for adolescents has proved to achieve better results than others, many approaches offer opportunities to improve care for adolescents today. In addition, coordinating current health services for adolescents—which often consist of separate programs and services that are fragmented and delivered in many different public and private settings—would be valuable. A coordinated effort combining well-trained health care providers, health organizations, community agencies, and funders to provide and support accessible health services could improve care delivery to the adolescent population. Health providers are one, very important, piece of this puzzle.

Key Facts

- There are limited opportunities for the health care providers to be trained about adolescent health.
- The existing training does not address many of the needs of adolescents.
- Many health care providers who treat adolescents fail to adhere to recommended prevention guidelines, to screen for appropriate risk factors and unhealthy behaviors that emerge during adolescence, and to provide effective counseling.
- The licensing, certification, and accreditation of programs for health providers in disciplines and specialties that may serve adolescents are minimal, inconsistent, and do not include appropriate requirements for adolescent health content and competencies.
- There are insufficient adolescent health care training programs to prepare postgraduate health care professionals who will be the teachers and trainers.

Recommendations

- Health providers who serve adolescents—across disciplines—should be trained to have the essential knowledge and skills needed to successfully engage young people, create opportunities to discuss sensitive health issues, provide prevention and health promotion services, and treat specific health problems.
- Regulatory bodies for health professions that offer care to adolescents should incorporate a minimal set of competencies in adolescent health care into their licensing, certification, and accreditation requirements.