

2.2 YOUNG PEOPLE AND HEALTH SERVICES

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Seeking health care can be difficult for many young people. Fear and embarrassment about discussing sensitive issues such as sexuality, drug use or other psychosocial problems can keep young people from seeking help, advice or information when they need it. Many young people are also unaware of the range and availability of health services they can access. For example, they may think that GPs treat only physical ailments, and be unaware that GPs can also help them with emotional and psychosocial concerns. Young people may also:

- **Have a poor understanding of their own health needs**
- **Lack knowledge about available health services and how to use them**
- **Have difficulty expressing their concerns because of the sensitivity of many of their health issues**
- **Feel self-conscious and anxious about being asked personal questions**
- **Defer treatment until at crisis stage**
- **Be reluctant health consumers, often brought along by parents or other caregivers**

General practitioners are the most visible primary health care provider and awareness of general practice among young people is high. GPs are usually the first point of contact with the health system, and see approximately two million young people under the age of 25 each year in more than 12 million consultations (AIHW 2011). GPs act as a gateway to the health system and can facilitate young peoples' access to other required health and support services.

Young people themselves perceive doctors as one of the most credible sources of health information. The quality of a young person's initial contact with a GP influences the way they perceive the health system and their future pattern of using health services. GPs can overcome barriers to access by making their services and consultations youth friendly (Booth et al 2002).

EXPLAINING GENERAL PRACTICE TO YOUNG PEOPLE...

ReachOut hosts a video produced by NSW Kids and Families which explains the role of General Practice and how to find a youth friendly General Practitioner for young people. See it at <http://au.reachout.com/visiting-a-gp>

There are also resources for classroom teachers to use with students about understanding General Practice at: <http://au.professionals.reachout.com/Youth-Friendly-General-Practice-video>

ACCESS ISSUES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

There are some barriers to accessing health care that are commonly experienced by young people.

Confidentiality: young people who are seeking health care are often concerned that the service provider might disclose information to their parents or someone else. A lack of privacy in the waiting room and fears of being recognised may also contribute to a reluctance to seek help. This is particularly a factor for young people in rural areas or small communities: young people may be worried that staff at the service (who may know family members of the young person) will not respect confidentiality.

Staff attitudes and communication style: a health professionals approach and communication style have a significant impact on a young person's comfort level and ease of communication. Young people sometimes believe doctors will be unsympathetic, disapproving or authoritarian in their attitudes to young people. Young people may not feel confident that they will be heard without judgement.

The physical environment and organisational factors: the actual physical space in which a service is located can be intimidating for young people. A very formal clinic and waiting room, strict or complex appointment booking procedures, and a perceived lack of sensitivity and awareness on the part of reception staff can contribute to a young person's reluctance to seek help. Inflexible clinic hours and long waiting times can also lead to young people forgoing health care.

Cost: the cost of health care can be a major barrier for young people. The Medicare system can be difficult to understand and few young people have their own Medicare card. Young people may believe that they cannot access a service without payment or without their parents finding out. If young people can't access a bulk billing service, they may have difficulty meeting the costs of health care and other expenses such as transport.

Systemic issues: there are a number of factors in the structure of health services that restrict access for young people. Staff often have inadequate training, knowledge, skills and confidence in understanding and managing psychosocial problems in young people. Time constraints and inadequate remuneration for providing longer consultations to young people also hamper the ability of services to work effectively with young people. Concerns about medico-legal issues can also reduce a services willingness to fully meet the health needs of young people in the community.

HOW HEALTH SERVICES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Many health services have a critical role to play in the effective management of youth health care. They can do this by providing developmentally appropriate assessment and treatment; promoting access to other services by identifying and managing pathways to care for the young person; and working collaboratively with both health and non-health services to promote health and wellbeing.

Health services can contribute to better youth health in four important ways.

1. Provide comprehensive health care appropriate to the young person's developmental needs and sociocultural background.

This means:

- Devoting time and using developmentally appropriate communication styles and tools to engage young people effectively
- Making sure that prevention activities and health interventions are developmentally appropriate
- Anticipating young people's need for simple, clear guidance about health matters
- Adopting a culturally sensitive approach respectful of the individual, their family and culture.

2. Identify, intervene early and educate young people about health-risk behaviours.

Service providers can:

- Identify and manage psychosocial risk factors and behaviours
- Make the most of their contact with a young person to educate them about health risks and to promote protective behaviours
- Address the social and environmental risk factors in the young person's life by working

with the family, school, and other key people in their lives

- Provide appropriate intervention for common youth health problems e.g. smoking

3. Promote young people's access to health services.

It is important to:

- Make services youth-friendly
- Act as a gateway to the health system by helping young people to access other services they need e.g. GPs, specialists, youth workers, psychologists
- Make services culturally sensitive to the needs of young people
- Help reduce the barriers that many young people (especially those at high risk or with multiple difficulties) face when accessing services
- Act as an advocate for young people's health needs within the health system, and with their families, schools, and wider community.

4. Adopt a collaborative approach.

Service providers can promote effective, multi-disciplinary health care by coordinating their care with, and making appropriate referrals to, other health professionals involved with the young person.

FINDING OUT MORE...

The *Youth Health Better Practice Framework Checklist* in the appendix of this Kit gives further guidance on making services youth-friendly.

CHAPTER SUMMARY - WHAT TO REMEMBER

Despite its prominence in primary health care, young people continue to experience barriers to accessing general practice as well as other health services, and general practice continues to experience challenges in providing optimal comprehensive care to young people with complex psychosocial health needs.

By better understanding how the health system works and identifying strategies for overcoming barriers to health care, youth services and other organisations can work with health services to promote better health care for young people.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What attracts young people to your service? How do you know this?

What are the barriers that prevent young people from accessing and/or engaging with your service? How do you know this?

How does your service demonstrate youth friendliness? How do you know this? What aspects of your service could be perceived as not youth friendly?

Has your service used the *Youth Health Better Practice Framework checklist* in the appendix of this Kit?

REFERENCES

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2011). *Young Australians, Their Health and Wellbeing 2011*, Cat No. PHE 140. AIHW: Canberra. www.aihw.gov.au

Booth M, Bernard D, Quine S, Kang M, Beasley L, Usherwood T, Alperstein G & Bennett D. (2002). *Access study phase I - access to health care among NSW adolescents*. NSW CAAH: Westmead, NSW.