

General practitioners play a vital role in providing information



GENERAL PRACTITIONERS are usually the first point of contact for people with depressive illnesses. Their ongoing support, encouragement and, most importantly, provision of appropriate information is critical to the management of these illnesses. Patients generally respect and trust their doctor and will be guided by the GP's advice.

Information is empowering. It allows people to make informed choices about their treatment and care. Initially, a patient suffering from a depressive illness may only need, or want, basic information about their illness. However, over time, the provision of more specific and detailed information for both the sufferer and his or her family is desired and appropriate. Unfortunately, doctors often assume that patients know more than they do about their illness. However, lack of knowledge about where to look, the stigma associated with depressive illnesses and the belief that they can somehow "pull themselves together" may dissuade many people with depression from directly asking the GP for information. Even the most proactive patients can become disheartened at the lack of general information about depressive illnesses available to the community.

GPs have taken on the role of information providers, but now need to see this role in broader terms. Consumers and carers want information in the form of handouts, lists of appropriate books and articles, website addresses, support group details and other available resources. It is also important that the information presented to patients is relevant, easy to read, written for the target audience and not biased. The Internet is extremely useful for accessing relevant information, but it is also a source of inappropriate information. Anyone can be an author about depressive illnesses on the Internet, writing only from their own point of view. For example, in a search on antidepressants, I found a website condemning their use, based only on the experiences of the writer.¹ This sort of (mis)information can be confusing to patients and their families. Therefore, gentle guidance of patients to appropriate websites, in addition to other sources of appropriate information, is crucial. The information in this supplement will help GPs and other healthcare professionals in this task.

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1. Prozac truth: letter from the editor [website]. <<http://www.prozactruth.com/conclusion.htm>>. Accessed 15 April 2002. □