

Adolescent Health Problems - Need to Intervene

Zahid Naeem

Department of Community Health Sciences, Baqai Medical University, Karachi.

World Health Organization defines adolescents as young people aged 10-19 years. Presently there are 1.2 billion adolescents, a fifth of world population with four out of five living in developing countries.¹ Due to present demographic trends their number is increasing. An adolescent is a journey from childhood to the world of an adult, a time of physical, physiological, psychological and emotional change. As the body matures and the mind starts questioning and becomes independent, they need assistance in learning to cope with the changes and to establish their own identity.

Adolescents are no longer children, but not yet adults. They can put themselves at risk without thinking of the consequences. They are generally believed to be healthy as death rate in them is lower compared to children and elderly people; but an estimated 1.7 million people aged 10 to 19 die each year mainly from accidents, violence, pregnancy related problems or illness which is preventable.² They get fascinated by many rowdy and thrilling adventures and actions and start living in world of dreams imagining themselves to be an unbeatable personality.

Adolescent boys and girls need extra nutrition as they grow rapidly. In our culture girls are fed last and least; which can delay puberty and lead to development of a small pelvis. Poorly nourished adolescent mothers are more likely to give birth to low birth weight (LBW) babies; besides anaemia is highly prevalent.³ Adolescent girls need support as they begin to menstruate, without support and knowledge, and may not know what is normal and how to recognize menstrual problems.

Unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions are common in developed countries but the same is being introduced in developing countries. Rapid growth of cities, breakdown of traditional family structure, exposure to mass media and internet, lead to risks associated with early and unprotected sex. Girls who become pregnant under age of 18 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than older women.

Behaviours like smoking, diet, exercise, use or abuse of drug and alcohol, sexuality and sexual practices, attitudes and preferences related to health and disease in general, are largely developed at adolescence. The biggest threat to the lives, health and well being of young people is addictive behaviour. It starts as an experiment with peers as for thrill; in form of occasional use. Most common form of addictive

behaviour among adolescents is cigarette smoking. Almost all regular smokers take up the habit by the age of 18 and half of the 150 million people who continue to smoke will die by tobacco related conditions.⁴ Many diseases of middle age and elderly such as lung cancer, bronchitis and heart diseases are strongly associated with a smoking habit beginning in adolescence. By the year 2030, mortality from smoking related diseases is expected to rise 10 million and over 70% of these deaths will be in the developing world. The most effective measures to prevent adolescents from taking up smoking include not selling cigarettes to children less than 18 years of age, ban on tobacco advertising, increasing the price through taxation and creating smoke free areas at schools, colleges and sporting venues.

Deaths and injuries from accidents are most likely in this age group; particularly boys are vulnerable to injuries and accidents throughout adolescence. Roadside accidents are common in urban areas. So it is important to make people strictly abide by traffic rules and this could only be done when road safety is implemented and followed upon.

HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are related to sexual habits. Sexually transmitted infections affect one in 20 young people every year. HIV/AIDS are world wide pandemic; across the world every day around 7000 young people are infected with HIV.⁵ Globally large number of children and adolescents are abused sexually. Girls 11-16 years of age are more at risk, but boys are at risk too. The Convention on rights of the Child gives children and adolescents the right to be protected against all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. Adolescents who are homeless, living on city streets or displaced by conflict or natural disaster are at high risk. There is an increasing world trade in sexual exploitations of young people mostly girls but also boys. UNICEF estimated that a million children and adolescents a year are recruited in to the commercial sex trade.⁶ Government should take care of those children by providing them shelter and compulsory education at school along with having a check on commercial sex areas.

Mental health problems frequently start in this age group. Depression is common in adolescents with low self-esteem. Depression can lead to ultimate tragedy - almost 90,000 young people commit suicide each year across the world. Mental health problems as anxiety, depression, eating disorders are also common in this age group.

Adolescent health problems are usually the result of their behavioural disorders. If the children entering the adolescent age are properly cared for and groomed physically and emotionally at home and school, they enjoy good mental health. It is important to mention here that school environment and behaviour of the teachers play a very important role in character building and personality development of teenagers, as this is the place where they have interaction with their age fellows. But unfortunately the importance of good teacher student relationship is never appreciated. It is common observation that adolescents do not receive an adequate nutrition, schooling and capacity building to equip them for future. Therefore it is important to intervene to educate and council adolescents properly. The child passes his/her teen years smoothly and becomes a useful adult personality. The government should also take some drastic actions to have check on internet service providers and all kinds of media especially the electronic media which is

watched mostly by teenagers, which project the culture, that is contrast to ours and it surely includes sex and action movies.

References

1. McIntyre P. Adolescent Friendly Health Services: an agenda for change [online] 2002. [cited 2004 Oct. 15]. Available from: URL:<http://www.who.int/child-Adolescent-health>
2. Smith A, Melville E. Targeting teenagers in the primary care setting. *Health Visitor* 2001;69:228-30.
3. Iliyas M. *Community medicine and public health*, 6th edition, Karachi, Pakistan: Times Publisher, 2003, pp. 569-82.
4. Churchill R, Allen J, Denman S, Fielding K, Williams D, Hollis C, et al. Factors influencing the use of general practice based health services by teenagers: a descriptive study in the East Midlands. Nottingham: Univedrsity of Nottingham, 1999, p. 109.
5. *Improving children's health: a survey of 1999-2000 health improvement programmes*. London: NSPCC, Children's Society, National Children's Bureau, 2000.
6. Jacobson LD, Mellanby AR, Donovan G, Taylor B, Tripp JH, members of the adolescent working group RCGP. Teenagers views on general practice consultations and other medical advice. *Fam Pract* 2000;17:156-8.