Digital approaches to mental health for children and young people

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Professor Christopher Dowrick, recently wrote an editorial in the BMJ discussing the place of computerised self help among adults for depression in primary care. He concluded that guided self help can be a useful intervention for mild to moderate depressive symptoms.

In our reply which the BMJ published as a letter we argued that similar options need to be further explored and researched for mental illness in children and young people (CYP). The statistics are alarming; 10% of CYP in an average school class will have experienced mental health illness and we know that the 75% of mental health illness in adulthood begins by the age of 18.

At a national level, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence advocate offering self-guided help for mild depression in CYP. As well as providing E-therapies that promote patient autonomy, more importantly treatment options must be acceptable and tailored to the patient. E-therapies also provide the unique opportunity for dynamic mental health care – such as case management and monitoring of mental health. The Future in Mind commissioned report acknowledges the potential of digital media for CYP and recommends incentivising the development of new apps and digital tools; but also cautions that there is a need for quality control and kite-marking schemes based on research evidence to guide young people and their parents toward the best resources.

Much of the evidence base in this field has been developed in Australia and has focused on the risk and benefits of digital approaches to mental health. Studies have shown that the greatest impact social media has on CYP is in mental health, specifically around self-esteem and well-being. There are concerns over cyberbullying and ‘Facebook Depression’, however key aspects from the literature support an emerging evidence base for the role of digital technology as a protective factor in the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental ill health.

At a practice level, there is also the benefit that digital technology can bring in terms of access and enhancing communication. Just as adults welcome accessing their GP through internet appointments, digital technology can benefit access and communication for CYP. Taking to social media and advertising pertinent practice news on Twitter for example can also help in making the practice more ‘youth friendly’ and building rapport with CYP, thereby improving accessibility for CYP in an area which has traditionally been difficult to do so.

As a College the RCGP has stated that the potentials of digital technology must be embraced but developments should be applied equally to primary and secondary care. Primary care has often led in the area of electronic technology particularly around patient medical records and communication.

The challenge now is to how to use technology effectively. The College has produced guidance for GPs and practice staff to promote online services to patients as part of its Patient Online toolkit.

Digital technology has the potential to help CYP have easier access to GPs and primary care and also to mental health prevention and promotion resources. The potential for E-therapy and dynamic patient management for CYP is significant but must be developed in a way that ensures apps and other technology are safe, reliable and evidence based before GPs and other doctors can feel confident in
recommending these to patients. The College supports MindEd, a digital online tool for clinicians, patients and carers for CYP mental health (https://www.minded.org.uk/).

References:
