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Experiences of healthcare workers in dealing with TB patients in a primary care setting in Singapore: a qualitative study

Patricia T Kin

Singhealth Polyclinics, Department of Research, Singapore

Corresponding author: Ms Patricia T Kin, Singhealth Polyclinics, Research, Singapore. E-mail: patricia.t.kin@singhealth.com.sg

Background: Tuberculosis (TB) continues to be a leading infectious disease killer worldwide. The global burden remains heavy, with majority of cases from Southeast Asia, Africa and Western Pacific region. As a standard of care and continuity of treatment, patients access primary care clinics to take their medications under the DOTS programme for 6-9 months. Healthcare workers facilitate TB treatment adherence through close patient monitoring to avoid disease spread, emerging drug resistance and treatment failure. In Singapore, TB rate increased following a small spike in cases in 2012 as a result of global migration and continued community transmission.

Aim: To understand the healthcare workers' experiences in managing TB patients in primary care clinics in eastern Singapore to make recommendations for improvements to this service.

Methods: A qualitative research was conducted based on an interpretative epistemology. Through purposive sampling, ten primary healthcare workers were recruited from polyclinics located in eastern Singapore. In-depth interviews explored their perceptions and experiences in managing TB patients under the DOTS programme. The data were subjected to a thematic content analysis.

Results: Three themes emerged. Barriers to TB care and control include a wide range of risk factors that can impact patient's treatment adherence & completion. Administrative challenges at the primary care clinics can cause treatment delay or possibly compromise infection control. A good healthcare worker-patient relationship is essential to support the TB patient throughout the therapy.

Conclusions: The healthcare workers' disease knowledge, working attitude, perceptions and views towards managing TB patients play an influential role to treatment adherence and completion. Their direct involvement in TB control and unique understanding of the multi-level factors which impact treatment adherence can help devise more effective and realistic strategies that can potentially minimise treatment defaults/delays in the primary care clinics and work towards eliminating TB in Singapore.