Helping patients to help themselves: the future for management of ulcerative colitis?

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Guided self management of ulcerative colitis with follow up on request, compared with traditional management, accelerates treatment provision, reduces visits to specialists and general practitioners, and does not increase morbidity.

van Illich believes that "the medical establishment has become a major threat to health". He reasons that the rise of modern medicine has encouraged a culture of dependency on the medical establishment rather than promoting self caring approaches to illness. This extreme viewpoint has a surprising number of supporters; perhaps because it contains a grain of truth. Clinicians can be paternalistic and often set up services with little regard to patient preferences or whether this is the most cost effective method of delivering health care. It is therefore refreshing to read the paper by Robinson et al comparing guided self management with usual care for ulcerative colitis (UC) patients in a randomised controlled trial. Patients were more satisfied with guided self management, and patients with relapses took steroids earlier. There was also a statistically non-significant trend for relapses to be of shorter duration. The results seem compelling, so should there be widespread implementation of this management strategy for UC?

This was a well designed and clearly reported study but inevitably some questions remain. More than 80% of participants had distal UC and only 5% were receiving azathioprine, hence the results pertain mainly to patients with left sided disease not taking long term immunosuppression. There also needs to be longer follow up as the initial enthusiasm for guided self care may diminish perhaps because visits do not coincide with relapses, treatment for relapse is often delayed, for patients hospital visits are inconvenient and often unnecessary, and it is costly for them.

The authors highlight the trend towards a reduction in the length of relapses in those allocated to guided self management but are rightly cautious in interpreting this finding. There was also a trend towards a greater proportion of self managed patients to relapse (61% in the guided self management arm compared with 49% in the usual care group). This was not statistically significant and may reflect the fact that relapses were self reported. However, if there were a 12% difference in relapse rates this would be clinically important.

What is clear from the data is that UC patients are dissatisfied with the current system, with a staggering 94% (80/85) of those randomised to usual management preferring another approach. It is interesting that although a large number of patients in the self management group preferred traditional management; 82% preferred self management. Health related quality of life scores were similar in the two groups and did not change during the trial.

Conclusion: Guided self management of ulcerative colitis accelerates treatment provision, reduces visits to specialists and general practitioners, and does not increase morbidity.
adopt guided self management for patients with left sided colitis in remission and without the need for immunosuppression. Others may be more cautious and want further trials from other centres, and comparisons with other strategies such as nurse led clinics and telephone consultations.  

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