

Self Help Groups and General Practitioners: Developing Workable Relationships

Introduction

Many GP's are very supportive of the activities of self help and support groups, often encouraging their patients to join, or even start a group. However, there still seem to be some commonly held fears about referring patients to self help groups. Groups in our network sometimes report to Self Help Queensland that they rarely, if ever, receive referrals from GP's.

Doubts GP's might hold about making referrals to self help groups

- The group might offer medical advice
- Joining a group could cause a person to become depressed because they are mixing with other sick people
- The group might influence a patient to stop taking their medication, or encourage them to try radical alternatives
- Once a patient disappears into the clutches of a self help group, they may never be seen again¹
- The patient may feel their doctor is trying to fob them off by suggesting they join a support group
- 'Lay' people are not as qualified in running groups as 'professionals'
- GP's don't have the time or energy – they might believe in principle but in practice they don't have the time to deal with self help groups
- The group might promote inaccurate information from unauthorised sources
- Patient confidentiality might not be respected
- The group might criticise the GP's handling of patients
- GP's traditionally see themselves as the sole provider of primary health services in the community
- Joining a group might make their patient worse, not better
- Groups could be facilitated by incompetent or inappropriate people

If your group would like to become known to local GP's, it would be helpful to address some of these long standing fears.

GP practices are extremely busy places. GP's may not even be aware of the activities and benefits of self help groups.

Suggestions as to how your group might develop mutually supportive relationships with GP's.

- Firstly, try a friendly visit to the practice. Introduce yourself to the receptionist. Explain who you are, the nature of the group, and seek advice as to the best approach in obtaining the attention of the GP. It may be as simple as making an appointment, (taking other members of the group with you) and explaining what you would like to achieve.
- Explain to the GP that your group is interested in developing a relationship with them.
- Be open and transparent, inviting the GP to share any reticence they might have about self help groups
- Invite the GP to attend a support group meeting.
- Ask the GP if they would be prepared to critique the group's promotional literature for accuracy and authenticity.
- Extend an invitation to the GP to be an honorary member, or Patron of the group – assuring them that this would not require them to spend time attending group meetings.
- Invite the GP to contribute an article to the group's newsletter.
- Seek out GP's who have a particular interest in the condition for which the group exists, and make yourself known to them.
- Invite the GP to be a guest speaker at your group meeting.
- Seek permission to leave the group's flyers/literature/newsletters in the waiting room.

Negotiate!

Because it is of particular interest to them, self help groups and their members often become aware of the results of new scientific treatments or medicines via the internet, electronic media, newspapers etc.

Your group may want to seek a GP's opinion about this new information. No GP can be expected to be an authority on every rare disease or sudden new potential breakthrough. Given the time constraints faced by GP's, and the fact that you may be presenting information they have not seen before, here are some suggestions that may help:

1. Ask the GP if they are prepared to enter an agreement with the groups about reviewing new information.
2. Be prepared to bring information only from legitimate medical sites acceptable to the GP.
3. Negotiate how much information the GP is prepared to accept at any one time (eg 4 pages downloaded from the internet).
4. Be prepared to leave the information with the GP and make another appointment to return to discuss it - after the GP has had sufficient time for review and research of their own.

References

- 1 'The Benefits of Self Help Groups and Linkages Between Self Help and General Practice Training', Health Issues Centre, VIC Research Report 1992 page 25

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