

Chronic Care Management for the Medically Vulnerable during the Pandemic: Experiences of Family Caregivers of Youth with Substance Use Disorders in Zambia

Authors : Ireen Manase Kabembo, Patrick Chanda

Abstract : Background: Substance use disorders are among the chronic conditions that affect all age groups. Worldwide, there is an increase in young people affected by SUDs, which implies that more family members are transitioning into the caregiver role. Family caregivers play a buffering role in the formal healthcare system due to their involvement in caring for persons with acute and chronic conditions in the home setting. Family carers of youth with problematic alcohol and marijuana use experience myriad challenges in managing daily care for this medically vulnerable group. In addition, the poor health-seeking behaviours of youth with SUDs characterized by eluding treatment and runaway tendencies coupled with the effects of the pandemic made caregiving a daunting task for most family caregivers. Issues such as limited and unavailable psychotropic medications, social stigma and discrimination, financial hurdles, systemic barriers in adolescent and young adult mental healthcare services, and the lack of a perceived vulnerability to Covid-19 by youth with SUDs are experiences of family caretakers. Methods: A qualitative study with 30 family caregivers of youth aged 16-24 explored their lived experiences and subjective meanings using two in-depth semi-structured interviews, a caregiving timeline, and participant observation. Findings: Results indicate that most family caregivers had challenges managing care for treatment elusive youth, let alone having them adhere to Covid-19 regulations. However, youth who utilized healthcare services and adhered to treatment regimens had positive outcomes and sustained recovery. The effects of the pandemic, such as job losses and the closure of businesses, further exacerbated the financial challenges experienced by family caregivers, making it difficult to purchase needed medications and daily necessities for the youth. The unabated stigma and discrimination of families of substance-dependent youth in Zambian communities further isolated family caregivers, leaving them with limited support. Conclusion: Since young people with SUDs have a compromised mental capacity due to the cognitive impairments that come with continued substance abuse, they often have difficulties making sound judgements, including the need to utilize SUD recovery services. Also, their tendency to not adhere to the Covid-19 pandemic requirements places them at a higher risk for adverse health outcomes in the (post) pandemic era. This calls for urgent implementation of robust youth mental health services that address prevention and recovery for these emerging adults grappling with substance use disorders. Support for their family caregivers, often overlooked, cannot be overemphasized.

Keywords : chronic care management, Covid-19 pandemic, family caregivers, youth with substance use disorders

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