

SYNOPSIS: WHO SHOULD LOOK AFTER GENITAL SKIN DISEASE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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Introduction

Genital dermatoses describe disorders that predominantly affect the skin of male and female reproductive organs. The range of diseases affecting the genitalia means these patients can present to many different health care professionals. The challenge in the UK is understanding how to best develop services to ensure prompt accurate diagnosis and management.

Epidemiology of Genital Dermatoses

Genital dermatoses are very common. Unfortunately, due to the stigma associated with the disorders, many patients do not seek medical attention and self-treat. Therefore, the incidence and prevalence are likely to be under-estimated.

Current Services in the UK

The first point of care for many patients will either be a general practitioner (GP) or walk-in sexual health clinic. From here, a proportion will be referred for specialist assessment to genito-urinary medicine (GUM), dermatology, gynaecology or urology.

Issues Facing the Management of Genital Dermatoses in the UK

Currently in the UK, patients may be unable to access the expertise that they need, suffering misdiagnosis and delays. Where services are available they often exist as a result of clinician led initiative, and are frequently oversubscribed¹.

The training in genital dermatoses varies significantly between different medical specialties. Whilst vulval dermatoses are commonly seen by gynaecologists^{2,3}, there is no formal assessment of vulval dermatoses in the gynaecology-training curriculum⁴. Genito-urinary medicine (GUM) specialists already treat a significant proportion of genital dermatoses. Their training curriculum requires knowledge of common conditions⁵. GUM clinicians have great expertise in the genital exam, and are well placed close to patients' homes in community sexual health departments, where patients often present.

Dermatology training affords skills particularly suited to the subspecialty of genital dermatology. The dermatology curriculum requires a robust basis of knowledge in male and female genital dermatoses⁶. Dermatologists are skilled at practical procedures such as biopsies, at interpreting histopathology reports and in examining extra-genital skin.

Genital Dermatoses Services Outside of the UK

Elsewhere, dermatology and venereology form one specialty, seeing a greater proportion of patients with genital dermatoses. A multidisciplinary (MDT) approach is considered gold standard in the UK and elsewhere⁷⁻⁹.

Future Directions for Management of Genital Dermatoses

Patients have responsibility for their own health¹⁰. Self-help groups are a crucial aspect of self-care, providing a support network for people who feel stigmatized and isolated by their disease.

A greater presence of these disorders in the public sphere is needed. Sex and relationship education in schools could break down taboos and teach young people how to promote genital health. Due to embarrassment, men often delay presentation of penile malignancies that require disfiguring yet preventable surgeries as a result of their late stage.

Inevitably patients will always present to a variety of specialties. A separate focused curriculum leading to a qualification would ensure a high standard of training in genital dermatoses across different specialties. The training for a qualification in genital dermatoses should also adapt to the changing requirements of a clinician in the 21st century, incorporating leadership and service management to address the patchy nature of genital dermatology provision across the UK.

In addition to clinicians, nurse practitioners and psychologists have a key role to play in the treatment of genital dermatoses. 1 in 5 women with vulval disease have either self-harmed or contemplated suicide as a result of their condition³. Nurse practitioners could take on some of the clinical workload and teach patients how to self-manage their conditions.

Conclusion

The physicians treating genital dermatoses in the 21st century should hold a robust qualification, overseen by a collaboration of experts from different specialties. This will ensure that genital dermatoses are always treated with the most appropriate care, whether by a specialist, nurse practitioner, psychologist, or by patient self-management.

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