

## CONTINUITY OF CARE OF THE SCHIZOPHRENIA PATIENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

Schizophrenia is a complex mental health disorder that places a huge burden on the individual's physical health. Despite its low prevalence, the disorder has been listed among the top ten contributors of health burden and disability around the world. People with schizophrenia usually suffer from a myriad of physical health conditions, with 33 percent of the patients having three or more physical health problems. Schizophrenia has been linked with an up to threefold increased risk of cardiovascular mortality. Risk factors such as metabolic disorders and lifestyle behaviours are the major contributors to cardiovascular-related diseases (CVD). Treatment of schizophrenia and its comorbid physical conditions often presents a challenge to healthcare professionals and caregivers due to the presence of multiple psychological and physical disabilities. However, with appropriate intervention at early onset, the likelihood of recovery will be highest. Primary care professionals are often the stable point of consultation for patients to seek help in the community. The partnership between the patient and primary care professionals is paramount in optimal management and continuity of care for schizophrenia patients with chronic physical illness.

**Key words:** Schizophrenia, community, continuity of care, primary care, chronic physical illness

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### INTRODUCTION

Schizophrenia is a complex mental health disorder characterised by symptoms such as delusions, hallucinations, disorganised speech and behaviour, blunted affect, reduced motivation, and other symptoms that cause social and occupational dysfunction. Worldwide, the prevalence of schizophrenia contributes to about 1 percent of the general population<sup>1</sup>. In Singapore, the lifetime prevalence for schizophrenia is estimated to be about 0.27 percent (Global Burden of Disease Study, 2017). While the prevalence of schizophrenia is relatively low, the disorder is listed among the top ten contributors to health burden and disability around the world.<sup>2</sup> While schizophrenia generally appears in late adolescence or early adulthood, it can affect anyone at any age.

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### SCHIZOPHRENIA AND ASSOCIATED HEALTH RISKS

People with schizophrenia generally lead a poor quality of life due to poor medical care, homelessness, unemployment, financial constraints, lack of education, and poor social skills.<sup>3</sup> They usually suffer from a myriad of physical health conditions. Carney et al reported that 70 percent of people with schizophrenia have at least one physical health problem, while 33 percent of them have three or more problems.<sup>4</sup> Numerous studies have reported a two- to threefold increase in risk of morbidity and premature mortality in people with schizophrenia, with an estimated 10 to 25 years' reduction in life expectancy compared with the general population.<sup>5-9</sup> While a large portion of premature deaths are attributable to suicides, violence, and other injuries, a greater portion of death is attributable to chronic medical illnesses,<sup>9</sup> with cardiovascular disease (CVD) and cancer being the leading cause of death.<sup>6,10</sup>

### SCHIZOPHRENIA AND CHRONIC MEDICAL COMORBIDITIES

Metabolic disorders such as hypertension, obesity, dyslipidaemia, and diabetes mellitus and other preventable risk factors such as unhealthy diets, tobacco and substance abuse, and a sedentary lifestyle are highly prevalent in patients with schizophrenia. Such risk factors are the major contributors to CVD. A recent study by Lee et al reported a 17.7 to 26.2 percent prevalence rate of metabolic syndrome in patients with schizophrenia in Singapore.<sup>11</sup> These patients are three times more likely to be at risk of cardiovascular mortality.<sup>11</sup> In another study by Heald, similar findings were also observed where metabolic syndrome is strongly associated with increased cardiovascular mortality.<sup>3</sup> Compared with the general population, cardiovascular mortality in patients with schizophrenia is reported to be significantly higher (12 percent versus 2.2 percent). In addition, side effects from antipsychotic medications used in the treatment of schizophrenia may cause weight gain and elevated blood sugar and cholesterol levels, further contributing to increased CVD risks and mortality.<sup>12</sup>

### TREATMENT GAP

The care for patients with schizophrenia often presents a challenge to healthcare professionals and caregivers due to the presence of multiple psychological and physical disabilities.<sup>13</sup> Patients with schizophrenia are less likely to engage in self-care and are reluctant to seek help and comply with medication due to their cognitive impairments. Their lack of insight to their illnesses lead to delays in treatment, which leads to further aggravation of their mental and physical health conditions. In addition, the lack of an integrated care model between psychiatric and medical care

further limits the accessibility of care. Hence, a holistic care and management plan is needed for effective management of schizophrenia and its comorbid physical health conditions.

### SCHIZOPHRENIA AND PRIMARY CARE IN THE COMMUNITY: EARLY DETECTION AND CONTINUITY OF CARE

Schizophrenia can be effectively managed with appropriate medications and treatment plans. The likelihood of recovery is highest when treatment is administered at its onset.<sup>3</sup> Primary care plays a paramount role in the early detection and management of patients with schizophrenia and chronic illnesses. They are often the first point of contact for patients who are willing and able to seek help.<sup>14</sup> Primary care professionals provide a holistic and personalised care to patients by managing their chronic illnesses, performing health screening for preventive care and early detection, and referring appropriate patients for specialised care. For schizophrenia patients living in the community, proper management of patients' psychiatric symptoms is essential in improving patients' quality of life and minimising their risk of relapse.

Modifiable risk factors such as patients' lifestyle behaviours, unhealthy dietary habits, physical inactivity, smoking, and drug usage can be managed by the primary care professionals through counselling, psychoeducation, psychotherapy,<sup>2</sup> and rapport building with the patient. Regular monitoring of patients' vital signs (e.g., blood pressure, body mass index measurement, neurological symptoms, and medication side effects), blood tests (e.g., blood count, glucose level, lipid level, renal function), and urine tests allow clinicians to sieve out abnormalities in patients' physical health and manage them, or refer them to the appropriate specialised care professional for intervention if needed.

Chong et al highlighted some of the strategies adopted to integrate mental and physical health for a more holistic care and management plan.<sup>2</sup> Strategies include public education on psychosis, providing decentralised and assessable mental healthcare services within the community, and onsite consultations at counselling centres in polytechnics and universities, as well as partnering with primary healthcare providers such as general practitioners, polyclinic doctors, counsellors, and traditional healers. The results of the Singapore National Mental Health Survey (SNMHS) in 1996 revealed that as much as 49 percent of mentally unwell patients chose general practitioners (GP) as their first point of consultation. In a similar poll, patients (56.7 percent) and their caregivers (74.5 percent) expressed that they are comfortable with psychiatric follow-up care provided by their GP.<sup>14</sup>

### CONCLUSION

There is a growing movement in Singapore towards community management of chronic mental and physical illnesses. In many cases, patients seen in psychiatric clinics in the local hospitals can be successfully referred to doctors in general practice for continued care. Patients with schizophrenia who are stabilised on maintenance medication could be right-sited to primary care professionals, such as GPs, for management as they offer flexibility, convenience, and a less stigmatising environment to patients who are committed to seeking help.

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**LEARNING POINTS**

- **The prevalence of schizophrenia contributes to about one percent of the world's population. In Singapore, the lifetime prevalence of schizophrenia is estimated to be less than one percent.**
  - **Schizophrenia usually occurs in late adolescence or early adulthood. However, it can affect anyone at any age.**
  - **Primary care plays an important role in preventive care and the continuity of care for schizophrenia patients with comorbid chronic physical illnesses.**
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