Parents as partners in the treatment of adolescent Anorexia Nervosa: Experiences and insights for practitioners

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed.................................................................

Dated.................................................................
Acknowledgements

It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.

Mahatma Gandhi

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Abstract

Anorexia nervosa (AN) is a life threatening mental illness that is “too cunning a problem for any one-size-fits-all approach” to treatment (Maisel, Epston & Borden, 2004, p.2). Applying a critical perspective to treatment experiences and practices is important in adolescent AN because it helps practitioners reflect upon how best to assist families manage the complexities of the illness. A systematic review of the literature revealed that while there is growing evidence for existing types of family-based interventions, such as manualised Maudsley family therapy (Maudsley), (Lock, Le Grange, Agras & Dare, 2001), the evidence for other types of family-based interventions is scarce. Furthermore, qualitative research on the experience of parents or caregivers caring for someone with AN shows high levels of burden and fatigue, difficulties accessing treatment and a sense of alienation from treating teams. The interplay of such findings suggest the need for a fresh approach to thinking and behaving in treating adolescents with AN to assist parents help their child recover from one of the most perplexing and complex disorders with the highest rate of mortality of all of the psychiatric illnesses.

This exploratory study of parents’ experiences of treatment for adolescent AN commenced in 2007, with the intent of recognising the experiences from parents and clinicians perspectives. It sought to understand how parents and clinicians made sense of their experiences of either receiving or providing treatment for adolescents with AN. The study aimed to identify the means by which treatment processes for adolescent AN can be optimised and thus enhance the recovery process. A mixed methodological approach was undertaken in two inter-connected studies: one with parents and one with clinicians. Interpretivist and positivist paradigms were fused to provide a flexible approach to the research design and enrich the findings of the small number of participants who took part in this study. The study was carried out in Newcastle, Australia, in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Data was collected from 15 parents, who had received family-based treatment for their adolescent with AN and from 20
clinicians experienced in providing this treatment. Parents and clinicians were invited to participate in a survey questionnaire, that yielded quantitative and qualitative data, and/or to participate in a semi-structured interview. Thirteen parents participated in the survey questionnaire and of those, seven participated in a semi-structured interview. Two parents participated in the semi-structured interviews only. All 20 CAMHS’s clinicians participated in both the survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996). IPA was chosen as a method of analysis for its focus on understanding the core nature of how people make sense of significant life experiences, while also recognising the dynamic process involving the ‘interpretative’ activity of the researcher (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Qualitative data analysis yielded core themes structured around the following three broad domains: parenting an adolescent with AN; experiences of treatment in CAMHS; and helpful and effective treatment. The themes revealed that treatment for adolescent AN is enhanced when knowledge for practice is obtained through synthesising and critically evaluating scientific knowledge with an understanding of individual and cultural experiences of families.