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Brooks, Joanna, Kime, Nicky, King, Nigel, Wearden, Alison, Gillibrand, Warren P., Webster, Liz and Campbell, Fiona

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Young people with diabetes and their peers

Further information:
Jo Brooks -
J.M.Brooks
@hud.ac.uk

Jo Brooks¹, Nicky Kime², Nigel King¹, Alison Wearden³, Warren Gillibrand¹,
Liz Webster², Fiona Campbell⁴

¹University of Huddersfield; ²Leeds Beckett University; ³University of Manchester;
⁴Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust



The social focus of young people shifts through adolescence from their family to their friends. **Peer influences** can have an impact across a range of adolescent behaviours¹.

Type 1 Diabetes (T1D) is amongst the most common form of chronic illness affecting young people in the UK. **Self-management** is crucial, but managing their T1D is often difficult for young people².

Interventions to support self-management in young people with T1D could usefully include their friends and peers³, but there has been little examination of **how peers think about and respond to T1D**. The aim of this work was to explore what peers know about the condition, and their attitudes and responses to it.

We used a **qualitative** approach, and conducted **interviews** with 10 **adolescent T1D patients** aged 13-15, along with a nominated **close friend** (n=20). We then carried out **focus group** sessions with **participants without any necessary prior knowledge of T1D** (n=15) in a secondary school setting. Full necessary ethical approvals were gained. We used **Template Analysis**⁴, a flexible but structured form of thematic analysis which emphasises hierarchical coding, to analyse data.

Interviews

- Limited awareness of T1D amongst peer group generally reported by all participants;
- Although patient participants were confident they could rely on their close friends should they need assistance in relation to T1D, friends themselves varied considerably in the extent of their T1D knowledge;
- Both pragmatic and emotional support was provided by close friends who play a valuable role in recognising the importance of T1D management, whilst also importantly accepting and normalising the condition;
- Considerable variations in experiences of support in school environment reported.

"The woman in the medical room says if I feel low or if I want to go to the medical room, I'm allowed to take someone with me, but the teachers don't let them out"

"Nurses have been to talk to the school loads of times and it just doesn't change now"

Focus groups

Educational materials designed in response to issues raised in the interviews were piloted with three focus groups. Sessions were structured as follows:

(1) **What do you know already?** Participants were asked for three words associated with 'diabetes' - these were then attached to one large piece of paper and discussed amongst all group members;

(2) **What would you do?** Realistic vignettes developed from the interviews were used to facilitate group discussion, assessing the situations described from the viewpoint of different actors;

(3) **Basic information and myth busting.** Discussion of misconceptions about T1D (reported in the interview stage as commonly encountered by participants) and some basic information about T1D given by facilitator.

This work highlights the **need for greater awareness of T1D in schools amongst teachers and peers**, but encouragingly suggests that **simple and easy to run educational sessions may be well-received**. The evident **lack of standardised school policies** in relation to diabetes management is worrying, and should be improved to ensure there are no barriers to optimal self-management for young people with T1D.

References:

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