

ABSTRACT

Consultations For Minor Illnesses: Factors Influencing
Patient's Decision To Consult A General Practitioner

Jacqueline Camilla McClean

The purpose of the study was to determine the influence of educational, social and domestic factors, self-care practices and the use of alternative medicine on the responses of patients attending the General Practice Unit with some common minor illnesses.

The design was a comparative survey of registered patients of the General Practice Unit presenting with minor illnesses specifically cough, diarrhoea, headache, tiredness, indigestion and joint pains with an age and sex matched control group of patients registered at the clinic but not presenting with a minor illness. The minor illnesses were self-limiting, not requiring hospitalization or referral and treated symptomatically with advice or

reassurance. The control group were patients with chronic illnesses, patients attending for Pap smears, antenatal and postnatal visits, Health Certificates and persons accompanying other relatives. The sampling frame was the practice register of the General Practice Unit, Wildey, St Michael, Barbados. The study was conducted at the General Practice Unit, through the completion of a questionnaire during the period October 1997 to April 1998.

Main outcome measures were, the differences between the groups in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, attendance at alternative medicine practices, self-treatment for minor illness, social stressors, aspects of personality, and consultation rates.

The results showed that socio-demographic factors, social stressors, dependency traits, attendance of alternative medicine practices and consultation rates appeared to be similar in both groups. While there was a similar level of education in the groups, the minor illness group had a greater

number of persons who demonstrated a level of proficiency that was needed in order to obtain a secondary level certificate. Self-care practices were utilized more by the minor illness group and, notably, consultation with a doctor or other therapist was sought more frequently. The exceptions were that the control group treated themselves with rest for cough, headache, and indigestion, and sought lay consultation from friends and family for these same complaints more than the minor illness group, and more controls used home remedies for joint pains. Education appears to be needed to promote and guide the use of self-care practices among all patients and to motivate a change in the use of health services by patients attending the clinic.

Keywords: Minor illness; Self-care practices; Health-seeking behaviour.