Raising COPD Awareness

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The Importance of COPD Education and Awareness

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) does not have the voice it needs to be heard. Unless someone starts a gimmick like the ice bucket challenge for ALS to raise awareness, educating others is a challenge in itself.

Despite the seriousness and prevalence of COPD, it can go undiagnosed due to a lack of awareness. Many people think of COPD patients as elderly smokers. Even worse, the symptoms of COPD may be viewed as a natural part of getting older, so medical attention is put off by the patient, and oftentimes, the physician.

The focus of raising awareness starts with physicians in the primary care setting. They are the health professionals who are on the front line of patient assessment. They need to be educated about how this disease is a heavy burden on the healthcare system. For the awareness strategy to work, these physicians need to be empowered as well. They need to know:

- COPD-like symptoms mean something when presented in people who don't fit the look of a COPD patient. They need to realize that patients with COPD will not fit nicely in a predictable category.
- Not all patients will be elderly and infirm.
- Smoking is not the only cause of COPD.

Spirometry needs to be available to make an objective diagnosis; the numbers (or data) will confirm the diagnosis. Many physicians may need to have information about spirometry and what the data means when performed on a patient. Clinical relevance of the data should coincide with the information so that the patient is treated accordingly.

It is also very important for the general public to be aware of the signs and symptoms of COPD, so they can recognize them in themselves or their loved ones and seek treatment as soon as possible.

The Importance of Education

In 2012 the World Health Organization listed COPD as the third leading cause of death in the world, behind heart disease and stroke. Most people could tell you what heart disease and stroke are, but look at you blankly when you say COPD.

Educating people about the life COPD patients lead is an important step to helping them understand the trials we go through in everyday life. This in turn can help in breaking down certain barriers that can be highly stressful for a COPD patient. Creating more pulmonary rehabilitation centres and removing the many restrictions we deal with having oxygen on air travel are just a couple.

Next page: fighting stigma and raising awareness of COPD.

The Importance of Education

Education is not just limited to people without COPD. Many COPD patients and some doctors are still unaware of the range of tools available to help control their disease. Living with COPD is not just about taking your medication — pulmonary rehabilitation is a first step to beginning regular exercise.

Stigma

The stigma associated with COPD is a little baffling. I've read comments people have made saying that patients with COPD deserve it due to their history of smoking. A key factor in heart disease and stroke is smoking, too, so does that mean those patients also deserve it?

The fact is many chronic illnesses can be linked to poor lifestyle choices — I've certainly made a few poor ones. One way to reverse people's perception is how you confront COPD. People admire positive attitudes and a positive attitude is a great weapon for battling COPD.

Again, this comes down to education which will help remove the stigma with this disease. The more people know and understand what patients go through, the more they are likely to show compassion and want to help.

Raising Public Awareness

Any disease you want to cure needs to be put into the public domain for discussion. By doing this you can make a case for funding, research and advise of new treatments. COPD is a disease that flies under the radar, yet it's one of the leading causes of death globally — and one which often goes undiagnosed.

In the United States alone, the American Lung Association suggests there are 12 million people who have been diagnosed and another 12 million more who remain undiagnosed. Bringing this to the attention of the general population can help in early detection and diagnosis as well as treatment options and prevention methods.

Like many diseases, COPD is largely preventable — but it's only through education this can happen. With over 80 percent of COPD patients contracting the disease due to cigarette smoke, we can make a difference by letting people know of the consequences of smoking and the long-term health issues it creates. If we are able to convince people to quit smoking early, or never take it up in the first place, imagine the difference it would make to COPD prevalence as well as other smoking-related diseases.

Controlling other aspects that can cause COPD, such as environmental factors and asthma, can help reduce the chances of developing COPD as well. Limiting your exposure to chemicals and pollutants as well as having a good management plan in place for your asthma is a good place to start.

Next page: how to raise awareness and why it is so important.

How Do We Raise Awareness?

A simple conversation with a friend or a stranger is all that's needed to start an awareness campaign. I've come across so many people who are actively out raising awareness through a number of different avenues, from running education seminars for people without resources, to motivational speaking events and media appearances to announce new breakthroughs in medication.

Social media has helped a lot in being able to capture large audiences for the purpose of COPD education. It has also allowed the advent of forums for patients, care givers and family to communicate with each other about a range of issues, from new medications to providing emotional support when we're going through a bad time.

Other ideas for raising public awareness of COPD are:

- **Posters and pamphlets:** a poster campaign can be an effective way to market the information for all to see. Pamphlets can educate both patients and physicians.
- **Event planning:** lectures and/or seminars can be presented by credible sources who are well-versed in the topic of COPD. This could be a pulmonologist or respiratory therapist. A session that teaches the importance of spirometry testing and how to properly perform it is an example of one of the seminars offered.
- **Community outreach:** you can get a group of healthcare partners to host screenings and workshops. COPD screenings can be done, like spirometry, at many community locations. Examples include health fairs, libraries, shopping malls, community centers, hospital community rooms and local churches.
- **Media sources:** it would behoove you to contact your local newspapers, TV, and radio stations about any events or relevant stories. Many community calendars are available so you can contact them about getting your events on their listings.

Why Is It So Important?

The importance of spreading COPD education and awareness can be summed up by a recent experience.

Two months ago I came across an elderly lady with COPD. Every breath was a struggle and she had no fight left in her eyes. I sat down and listened to her story and it didn’t take long for me to realize how much work needs to be done educating patients.

She wasn’t on oxygen, hadn’t heard of pulmonary rehab, had no family/support network and had a limited amount of medication. She had been diagnosed many years ago and was told there was no cure and it would just get worse. Without support or a computer to research her options she felt helpless against this disease. I can only wonder what a good COPD action plan at the time of her diagnosis may have done to change both her mental and physical health.

Raising awareness and getting people educated and involved in the fight against COPD would mean stories like this one will not need to be told.