‘I think of it primarily as a skin complaint’: GPs’ perspectives on the management of psoriasis

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INTRODUCTION: Psoriasis is a life-long inflammatory condition affecting around 2% of the UK population. It is characterised by thick, red, heavily scaled plaques on the skin and scalp and can impact on a person’s quality of life, psychological and social functioning. There is some indication of patient dissatisfaction with the management of psoriasis, however, little is known how GPs conceptualise psoriasis and their confidence in managing patients with the condition. The aim of this study was to gather in-depth perspectives from GPs about the management of patients with psoriasis.

METHODS: Face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 GPs in North West England. The sampling strategy purposively focused on experience and time in practice, as well as ensuring a mix of genders and ethnicities. The transcribed interviews formed the data, which were coded using constant comparison across the data set, resulting in a thematic framework incorporating all the key issues and concepts.

RESULTS: Some GP respondents had a limited understanding of psoriasis describing it as a skin condition with only a minority suggesting it was a complex, systemic disease requiring long term monitoring. GPs recognised the visible impact of psoriasis on patients and describing exploring this in their consultations. Some GPs blamed aspects of the patient’s lifestyle for flare-ups and, whilst recognising the treatment burden on patients, also suggested that poor concordance led to treatments being ineffective. Whilst some GPs recognised the distress that psoriasis could cause patients, there was no suggestion that case-finding for depression might be appropriate in this patient group. GPs varied in confidence in their perceived ability to manage patients with psoriasis, and some described patients with psoriasis as ‘heart-sink’. Examination in consultations was felt to be important in new presentations of the condition and the role of touch was deemed important by many GPs to demonstrate empathy and reduce patients’ concerns that their psoriasis may be perceived as contagious.

DISCUSSION: GPs demonstrated some lack of understanding of psoriasis as a long-term condition and limited confidence in the management of patients with psoriasis. Implications of these results will be discussed for medical student education and learning and GP training.