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Teenage health care

THE government's *Health of the young nation* campaign is underway. It therefore seems timely to read Joan Griffith's editorial in the *American Family Physician*. This gives 13 tips on 'how doctors can improve their approach to young people and increase their trust in their physician'.

In our time-starved National Health Service, Griffith's advice to 'take time to establish good rapport' may at times be difficult to follow. However, as the author says, 'such time is well spent, especially prior to discussing sensitive issues', for 'good rapport opens the door through which adolescents can address their hidden agendas'.

Further tips include: 'establish the limits of confidentiality early'. Griffith points out that this saves future difficulties, especially when the doctor finds that he or she is dealing with possible suicidal tendency, drug use, or sexual or physical abuse.

Is the American system of medical care for this age group so different from that of the United Kingdom? For the overworked general practitioner in the UK there is perhaps less incentive to discover the adolescent's hidden agenda, for once Pandora's box is opened, more work beckons. Yet general practitioner satisfaction, as well as the future health of our young patients and society's health, require that distressed adolescents reveal their secret problems to sources of help. As the author points out, 'the staggering statistics of new morbidities amongst adolescents weigh heavily on our society, and should motivate us to improve our outreach to the adolescent population'.

Why is it that most of the research into primary care for adolescents comes from the United States of America? The Royal College of General Practitioners working party on adolescents believes that it is time that general practitioners in the UK studied in greater depth teenage consultations and general practitioner communication skills for this age group. Perhaps it is too much to hope that more resources for such research will be forthcoming from those responsible for the government's *Health of the young nation* campaign.

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Source: Griffith JR. Building bridges, not walls: caring for the adolescent [editorial]. *Am Fam Physician* 1995; **51**: 732,734,737,741.

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