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Exploring facilitators and barriers in asthma management in rural, semi-urban and urban populations in Vellore, India

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DOI: 10.1111/cea.14477

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Document Version Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Williams, I, Daniel, J, Mansur, AH, Christopher, DJ & Krishna, MT 2024, 'Exploring facilitators and barriers in asthma management in rural, semi-urban and urban populations in Vellore, India: an interview study of patients and primary care physicians', *Clinical & Experimental Allergy*. https://doi.org/10.1111/cea.14477

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

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Received: 10 November 2023

RESEARCH LETTER



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Exploring facilitators and barriers in asthma management in rural, semi-urban and urban populations in Vellore, India: An interview study of patients and primary care physicians

To the Editor,

The Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study reported an estimated 269 million patients with asthma worldwide, including approximately 35 million in India.^{1,2} Whilst prevalence of asthma and other allergic conditions such as eczema is relatively low, the substantial population burden is exacerbated by patchy health service frameworks, lower health literacy levels in rural areas, and high levels of indoor and outdoor air pollution. These make management of asthma challenging in India (Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Lancet planet health).³⁻⁷ Previous studies exploring reasons for uncontrolled asthma in India have focussed mainly on the paediatric age group,^{8,9} and data on adult asthma patients are sparse.

This study aimed to understand patient and primary care physician views and perspectives regarding asthma, and the facilitators and barriers to uptake of treatment and engagement with health services in Vellore district, South India. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of patients and primary care physicians to address the research aims. Patient interviewees (n=46) were ≥ 18 years old and had physician-diagnosed asthma as per GINA 2021 guidelines.⁹ Patients were identified from three primary care sites selected to include rural, semi-urban and urban areas, drawing on the knowledge and networks of the Indiabased members of the research team. We contacted the Vellore branch of the Indian Medical Association and obtained a list of medical practitioners in Vellore. Physicians (n=20) who manage asthma were shortlisted, including in rural, semi-urban and urban areas. Semi-structured interviews took place face to face and were conducted by the author team using topic guides designed to cover the primary research aims (Table 1).

Further study details can be found at https://zenodo.org/records/ 10469856. Three main themes were identified from the data: patient understanding of treatment, barriers to access and improving asthma management.

Physicians expressed concern over levels of patient adherence with prescribed care, citing poor knowledge and patients often being unable to provide an accurate symptom history. In apparent support of these claims, patient interviewees voiced fears that asthma is 'contagious', and expectations of a 'cure' for the condition. Some attributed onset to unlikely causes such as faulty medication, or poisonous water.

Many self-described as adhering to prescribed treatment regimens, including tablets, inhalers or a combination of both. However, some expressed a reluctance to use inhalers for fear of becoming 'dependent'. Some physicians also described poor compliance following initial symptom relief. As a result of these limitations, some judged patients—especially those in older age categories—to be unable to appropriately use the Metered Dose Inhaler (MDI), and they therefore prescribed oral medication. This problem was compounded by the lack of time available to them to overcome the technical challenges patients faced, or to explain the benefits of inhalers.

Patients reported obstacles to accessing mainstream health services, with financial barriers the most frequently cited. Some described reliance on family members to pay for treatment and others selling land and possessions for this reason. Linked to this were concerns about travel and waiting times, which were especially cited by patients in rural or semi-urban areas.

Social stigma was also noted by physicians and a small but significant number of patients, who described people 'looking at them differently' or avoiding them due to their asthma. Many patients expressed a preference for alternative treatments (e.g., Ayurveda and Siddha medicine), or a willingness to supplement standard treatments with ointments, herbs and steam inhalation.

Physicians reported shortages in training and education in asthma management since qualifying, and agreed that updated training would be beneficial, including in treatment of allergic rhinitis. Key points of consensus were that training should be practically focussed, available online (as well as in person) and should focus on 'refreshing' of core elements and updating on new developments.

Other suggestions included targeted education and awareness raising for patients, allied with resources for follow-up, including via telephone. Training for patients and communities was recommended in areas of prevention/lifestyle, management and combatting social stigma. Patients and physicians emphasized the need to address affordability of treatment, for example, through reducing treatment costs for lower socio-economic patient populations and offering online consultations. Cultural and religious aspects were important

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in shaping attitudes and behaviours, and this was consistent across geographical groups.

2

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Purposive sampling of participants from varying settings within the Vellore district make our findings widely relevant with respect to geographical area of residence, given the differences in socio-economic status, literacy, levels of indoor and outdoor pollution, access to medical care, and cultural and social factors. The study sample is also diverse with respect to age, gender and socio-economic strata. However, some of these findings may not be generalisable to other Indian states and union territories owing to differences in cultural and social factors, and further multicentre studies that do not rely solely on clinic populations are needed to gain insight to help inform a strategic response at the national level.

In conclusion, this study highlights significant gaps in the level of understanding of adult patients regarding the fundamental aspects

Summary box

- In India, there are deficits in asthma self-management and asthma training for primary care physicians.
- We advocate culturally tailored interventions for patients and clinically oriented training for primary care physicians.

of asthma and its management in Vellore district and some gaps in basic training for primary care physicians in the diagnosis and management of asthma. The data call for multi-pronged strategies including culturally tailored and targeted supportive interventions towards improving asthma care, as well as provision of free or subsidized treatment for those economically deprived. Furthermore,

| TABLE 1 Demographic details of interviewees in each sample grou | A | ١E | З | L | Е | 1 | | Demogr | aphic | details | of | int | erviewee | es in | each | sample | grou | Jp |
|---|---|----|---|---|---|---|--|--------|-------|---------|----|-----|----------|-------|------|--------|------|----|
|---|---|----|---|---|---|---|--|--------|-------|---------|----|-----|----------|-------|------|--------|------|----|

| Part one: Patient interviewee characteristics | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|--------|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------------|--|--|--|
| Age (years) | Comorbidities | Gender | Religion | Socio-economic status ^a | Type of housing | | | |
| Urban area | | | | | | | | |
| 33 | GERD | М | Hindu | Upper middle | Pucca | | | |
| 49 | GERD, Hypertension | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 62 | Old cerebrovascular accident | Μ | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 49 | GERD, Depression, anxiety, rheumatism, diaphram palsy, endometriosis | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 45 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 50 | GERD, post-COVID | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 42 | No | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 48 | Dyslipidemia, nasal polyposis | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 26 | Nephropathy | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 25 | Hypothyroid | F | Muslim | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 30 | PCOD | F | Christian | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 51 | GERD, post-COVID | Μ | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 32 | GERD, Post-COVID | Μ | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 23 | No | F | Hindu | Upper middle | Pucca | | | |
| 48 | Hypertension, dyslipidaemia | М | Hindu | Upper middle | Pucca | | | |
| Rural area | | | | | | | | |
| 49 | Old cerebrovascular accident | F | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca | | | |
| 60 | Renal surgery | F | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca | | | |
| 55 | Hypertension | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 90 | No | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca | | | |
| 48 | No | F | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca | | | |
| 35 | Depression | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 70 | No | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca | | | |
| 40 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 49 | No | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca | | | |
| 70 | No | F | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca | | | |

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Part one: Patient interviewee characteristics

-WILEY 3

| Age (years) | Comorbidities | Gender | Religion | Socio-economic status ^a | Type of housing |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|--------|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 57 | No | М | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca |
| 71 | No | F | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca |
| 40 | GERD, diabetes | F | Hindu | Upper lower | Semi pucca |
| 78 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca |
| 82 | Hypertension | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| Semi-urban are | ea | | | | |
| 28 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca |
| 68 | Insomnia, hypertension, diabetes | М | Christian | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 25 | Depression, anxiety | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 69 | Diabetes | М | Hindu | Upper middle | Pucca |
| 58 | Depression, anxiety | М | Hindu | Upper middle | Pucca |
| 66 | Osteoarthritis | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 65 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 43 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 86 | Hypertension | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca |
| 54 | Hypertension | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca |
| 92 | Hypertension | М | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 60 | Hypertension | F | Christian | Lower middle | Pucca |
| 54 | Diabetes | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Pucca |
| 63 | Anxiety | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |
| 45 | No | F | Hindu | Lower middle | Semi pucca |

Part two: Physician interviewees

| Code | Age | Gender | Qualification | Place |
|------|-----|--------|------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | 52 | М | MD General Medicine | Gudiyatham |
| 5 | 46 | F | MBBS | Gudiyatham |
| 3 | 54 | М | DNB Respiratory Medicine | Sripuram |
| 4 | 65 | М | MD Paediatrics | Vellore |
| 7 | 42 | F | MD Paediatrics | Sathuvachari |
| 8 | 36 | М | MD Respiratory Medicine | Vellore |
| 6 | 35 | F | MD Anaesthesia in General practice | Vellore |
| 9 | 31 | F | MD Respiratory | Vellore |
| 10 | 34 | М | MD General Medicine | Vellore |
| 11 | 34 | М | MS ENT | Vellore |
| 12 | 28 | F | MD General Medicine | Vellore |
| 13 | 31 | М | MD Community health | Bagayam |
| 14 | 32 | М | MD General Medicine | Ranipet |
| 15 | 34 | М | MD Respiratory Medicine | Vellore |
| 2 | 42 | М | MBBS | Ranipet |
| 16 | 32 | F | MD General Medicine | Vellore |
| 17 | 29 | М | MD General Medicine | Ranipet |
| 18 | 34 | М | MD General Medicine | Vellore |
| 19 | 35 | F | MD Community health | Chittoor |
| 20 | 37 | F | MBBS | Karigiri |

Abbreviations: F, female; M, male.

^aSocio-economic status is using Modified Kuppusamy Scale.

sustainable practical and clinically orientated training initiatives are needed for primary care physicians.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

IW was involved in study design, data analysis and was lead for drafting the manuscript. JD was the primary researcher and was involved in data analysis and was co-lead in drafting the manuscript. DJC and MTK were principal investigators and led study design, data interpretation and contributed to drafting the manuscript. AM was involved in data interpretation and contributed to drafting the manuscript. All authors had full access to all the data in the study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication. IW and JD accessed and verified the data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the UK R&I Global Challenges Research Fund via Institute of Global Innovation, University of Birmingham, UK, funding the research reported in this paper. We thank all interviewees who gave up their time to share their views and experiences with us.

FUNDING INFORMATION

UK R&I Global Challenges Research Fund via Institute of Global Innovation, University of Birmingham, UK.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

In the past 36 months, the team have received funds to conduct the study reported in the manuscript from the Institute for Global Innovation, University of Birmingham, UK. Dr Adel H Mansur has received personal and institutional funds for talks, advisory board meeting attendance, and educational grants from Astrazeneca, GSK, Novartis, BI, Chiesi, Teva, and Sanofi.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Deidentified data collected in the study will be available on reasonable request from the authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Research ethics approval for the study was secured from the Universities of Birmingham (ERN_21_0069) and Christian Medical College, Vellore (IRB Min No. 14029).

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4 WILEY