Needs Assessment for the Design of an Informatics Tool for HIV Counselors

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Abstract

HIV counselors play a vital role in treatment adherence and disease management for HIV positive individuals. Tasks include encouraging treatment adherence, offering counseling for complex issues, and providing information resources. An initial needs assessment suggests that a gap exists in the training needs of HIV counselors to promote the effective implementation of evidence-based practices. The HIV TIPS, a web-based decision support system, is being further developed to meet these needs.

Introduction

HIV counselors play a vital role in supporting and promoting treatment adherence and effective disease management among HIV positive individuals. The counseling needs of HIV positive individuals can be particularly challenging, requiring a wide range of knowledge and comfort with counseling on sensitive and complex issues. However, counselors often struggle with managing many cases in an environment of limited time and resources. A foundational base of understanding, knowledge, confidence, and training for counselors has been shown to be necessary requisites of effective counseling efforts1,2. We completed an initial needs assessment to explore the role of an informatics tool to alleviate some of the challenges of HIV counseling.

Interviews Uncover HIV Counseling Needs

Interviews with 19 HIV counselors elicited information about counselors’ training and education background, current counseling practices, and specific needs and challenges of their work. Interviewees were asked to define the following concepts: harm reduction, motivational interviewing, depression, stigma, and stages of readiness. Additionally, interviewees were asked about their work practices, particularly about their familiarity and use of guidelines. Interview responses were analyzed by three coders to ensure inter-coder reliability. The interviews assessed the degree to which counselors’ work practices are based on models grounded in theory and research. The interviews also assessed how computer-based tools can support counselors’ work. Preliminary findings from the analysis reveal gaps in training needs, reflected by the quality of concept definitions. The assessment further highlights the need for an informatics tool that promotes evidence-based practices, particularly through access to accredited and relevant guidelines at the point of care. Finally, the assessment indicates that counselors seek resources on a wide array of topics, including patient education, medication, and local resources. Interviewees expressed interest in receiving support from a web-based tool to fulfill their information and resource needs.

HIV TIPS – Meeting the Challenges

An informatics tool can help bridge the existing training gaps, when used during the training process or as a reinforcement tool during counseling practice. Patient participation in the tool could further promote counseling effectiveness by facilitating patient education.

The HIV TIPS (Tailored Information Provider Services) provides web-based access to information and treatment resources as well as relevant case-specific guidelines to promote evidence-based practices. As HIV TIPS was initially designed for medical providers, the needs assessment will inform further development of HIV TIPS to extend functionality and serve a broader audience.

Conclusion

While decision support and clinical care tools are increasingly developed and implemented for the clinical sphere, our initial assessment highlights the need for similar tools in the public health domain, particularly for HIV counseling efforts. Future direction stemming from this finding would be to further test and develop the existing HIV TIPS tool in promoting these efforts.

References