

We had a chat with Megan, our Teenagers and Young Adults with cancer (TYA) nurse to find out more about what she does and why her role is so important to young people with cancer.

What do you do?

I'm a specialist nurse for teenagers and young adults with cancer. This includes patients from 16 years old until their 25th birthday. It's only over recent years, that healthcare professionals have recognised that this patient population are neglected and vulnerable and if they do get cancer that they have different needs to adults and children.

How are their needs different to an adult?

At that age they are going through a transition from being a child and being dependent on their family to gaining their independence, going out in the world and experiencing new things. Obviously if they have a cancer diagnosis during that time then that just turns their world upside down. Some patients have to move back home, stop going to college, university or work, and become dependent on their parents again.

So how do you get them to talk about what issues they are really concerned about?

The Southwest Team which I am part of, have developed a holistic needs assessment called the 'I am' which is an internet based app. They can download it onto their phones. It has sections about different areas in their lives, from physical wellbeing, sex and fertility, finance, housing, family and social interests. They are invited to do an online assessment, independently or with a healthcare professional like myself. It helps me to recognise the areas where I can help.

All the TYA health professionals come together once a week, to discuss our patients and formulate plans, which are then shared with the patient. We go through the treatment options and side effects. Body image is a big issue for this age group, things like losing their hair. They don't want to look different. Fertility preservation is high on the agenda, if they're looking to the future and wanting to have a family. My patients want to know how long they will be in hospital, what their follow up is, what their overall prognosis is.

Do you support their close family members?

Yes, we do support their family members and important friends. For example if they doesn't feel that they can talk to them or explain what is going on, then we can do that on their behalf.

How difficult is it not to get too involved because you are dealing with vulnerable young adults?

It is difficult, you have got to be wary of professional boundaries. They are patients first and foremost. It's very hard but you shouldn't cross that line.

How do you cope with some of the emotional things you have to hear?

Everybody's different but I've been looking after this age group for over 20 years, so I cope with it ok.

What's the best thing about your role?

I like that age group. They're a great challenge. They're good at banter and you need a good sense of humour. You can't be easily offended. They keep you young. They're always positive and cope so well.

Any unusual things you've been asked to do?

It's a perk of the job that sometimes you get to meet the odd celebrity or musician. In your average everyday job you don't always get to do that.

How do you communicate with young people?

Text. They're not ones for engaging by speech very often. So texting is best, because they will reply if you send them a text. Occasionally emails work, if I need to send them out a lot of information or leaflets, or refer them to other things to look at, but normally its text messages – they are comfortable communicating that way.

You're in your dream job but if you could do anything else, what would it be?

I like airplanes, I do like airports. I'd quite like to work in an airport. They're quite interesting places.

Favourite film

I quite like old black and white films. Some Like It Hot, Casablanca, all those sort of classics

If money was no object, what would be your perfect weekend?

On a nice beach somewhere, lying in the sun, lovely sea, good food and drink, nice company. The Bahamas maybe ...