Counselling in primary care

Authors' objectives
To summarise information relating to the effectiveness of counselling in primary care.

Authors' conclusions
Counselling can be useful in the treatment of mild to moderate mental health problems, in the short-term (up to 6 months). In the longer-term (8-12 months), there are no differences in outcomes between counselling and usual GP care.

There is some evidence that the total costs incurred when patients are treated by counsellors are similar to patients receiving usual GP care. Counselling may be as effective as alternatives such as cognitive-behaviour therapy and medication for the types of patients who are managed in primary care.

The current evidence suggests that provision of counselling may make a useful addition to primary care provision alongside other mental health treatments. Commissioners of services can use the information contained in this issue of Effectiveness Matters to decide whether current provision should be maintained, increased or reduced, in the light of existing service provision and local priorities.

Those responsible for commissioning and providing counselling services should ensure that therapists meet the training and supervision standards set out by the relevant professional organisations. Audit should be encouraged in order to ensure continuing high quality provision of care.
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