Abstract: Background In 2006 the Chicago consensus statement on the management of people with variations of sex characteristics (VSC) acknowledged the importance of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach. The consensus update from 2016 reinforced the call for multidisciplinary collaborations between medical professionals, parents and support groups, and proposed guidelines to improve shared decision making and patient-centred care embedded in ethical principles of self-determination and child participation. But there is little evidence that successfully MDTs have been implemented in clinical practice. Methods and aims A scoping review was conducted to identify studies that address the collaboration and decision making process of MDTs providing care of people with VSC to identify ideal and actual (1) team composition; (2) models of collaboration and (3) ethical principles that MDTs follow. Six databases were systematically searched: CINAHL, Medline, Psychinfo, Scopus, Socindex and Web of Science. No restriction was placed on the type of methodology used in the studies. To frame the research, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses was used. Results The MDTs in the literature include mainly medical professionals: endocrinologists, urologists and surgeons. The collaboration among medical professionals in MDTs lacks cooperation as one team member sets the tasks of the team while each professional works separately. Despite the importance of psycho-social support the involvement of psychologists remains secondary. The implementation of ethical principles tends to exclude people with VSC. Conclusion The care of people with VSC described in the papers is medically oriented as the team members are mainly medical professionals working separately. MDT tend to exclude people with VSC despite references to shared decision making processes and informed consent. There was no mention of adult care and lack of inclusion of patient’s perspective in the care process. The future research should do more empirical research of MDTs.
Gramc, Martin; Streuli, Jürg Caspar; De Clercq, Eva (2021). Multidisciplinary teams caring for people with variations of sex characteristics: a scoping review. BMJ Paediatrics Open, 5:e001257.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2021-001257
Multidisciplinary teams caring for people with variations of sex characteristics: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Background In 2006 the Chicago consensus statement on the management of people with variations of sex characteristics (VSC) acknowledged the importance of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach. The consensus update from 2016 reinforced the call for multidisciplinary collaborations between medical professionals, parents and support groups, and proposed guidelines to improve shared decision making and patient-centred care embedded in ethical principles of self-determination and child participation. But there is little evidence that successfully MDTs have been implemented in clinical practice.

Methods and aims A scoping review was conducted to identify studies that address the collaboration and decision making process of MDTs providing care of people with VSC to identify ideal and actual (1) team composition; (2) models of collaboration and (3) ethical principles that MDTs follow. Six databases were systematically searched: CINAHL, Medline, PsycINFO, Scopus, Socindex and Web of Science. No restriction was placed on the type of methodology used in the studies. To frame the research, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses was used.

Results The MDTs in the literature include mainly medical professionals: endocrinologists, urologists and surgeons. The collaboration among medical professionals in MDTs lacks cooperation as one team member sets the tasks of the team while each professional works separately. Despite the importance of psycho-social support the involvement of psychologists remains secondary. The implementation of ethical principles tend to exclude people with VSC.

Conclusion The care of people with VSC described in the papers is medically oriented as the team members are mainly medical professionals working separately. MDT tend to exclude people with VSC despite references to shared decision making processes and informed consent. There was no mention of adult care and lack of inclusion of patient’s perspective in the care process. The future research should do more empirical research of MDTs.

INTRODUCTION

Variations of sex characteristics (VSC) demand a multidisciplinary care approach,1 because human sex is determined by multiple factors2: genetic, gonadal, hormonal, phenotypic and psychological sex. The need to bring together a broad range of healthcare professionals to provide care for people with VSC has been recognised also by the Chicago consensus statement of 2006.3 4 The consensus statement has introduced new guidelines for the care of people with VSC and their families. These recommendations include: (1) the provision of long-term multidisciplinary care (including psycho-social support), open and ongoing communication, the deferral of early cosmetic surgeries until the age of informed consent and the use of a new medical umbrella term differences of sex development (DSD).3 4 According to the consensus statement, multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) are to include: (paediatric) endocrinologists, urologists, surgeons, psychiatrists/psychologists, gynaecologists, geneticists, neonatologists; and if available: social workers, nurses and medical ethicists.3 The MDT should educate other healthcare professionals involved in the treatment of people with VSC, communicate with family members under supervision of a (health) care professional and develop a plan for
clinical management. Care should be patient-centred and focus on children’s growing capabilities to participate in decisions regarding their health and thus pose a limit to parental authority. The updated consensus statement of 2016 seemed to recognise this important paradigm shift in children’s rights by considering shared decision-making as ‘the crux of patient-centred care’. Healthcare experts should share their knowledge but also their uncertainties in care and outcomes with patients and families and give them enough time and support to make fully informed decisions.

A crucial aspect of this patient-centred, individualised care approach is the endorsement by the Chicago consensus of healthcare teams that are composed of different provider types. Such teams can be multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary depending on the degree of collaboration. The Chicago consensus does not specify which MDT would be the most appropriate. However, the 2016 update defines types of collaboration in detail. In MDTs two or more team members work simultaneously but separately; interdisciplinary teams involve the joint work of professionals from different disciplines sharing knowledge and skills to address a common problem and in transdisciplinary teams various disciplines are brought together to create new ways of solving problems and share responsibility of care. Although Lee and colleagues explain the differences between these types of teams, they do not give any practical indications on how to set up such teams, nor do they explain which type of team is more suitable in which kind of context.

Studies suggest that regular MDT meetings may result in active deferral of early cosmetic surgeries. On the one hand, data seems to suggest that the majority of teams in Europe accept the MDT approach while other studies portray a less optimistic situation. Moreover, empirical data on the actual functioning of MDT, their collaboration with patients and families as well as their efficacy remain poorly documented. It is often unclear, in fact, who is actually included in the team, what the role of each team member is, how various healthcare professionals collaborate, how people with VSC and their families are involved in the decision-making process regarding their health and what impact MDT have on care management and patient well-being.

The following paper aims to critically examine the existing scientific literature on the composition of MDT in the care of people with VSC, to describe the implementation of MDTs in the care of people with VSC. For this purpose, the manuscript aims to identify ideal and actual (1) MDT composition; (2) models of collaboration and (3) ethical principles that guide MDTs. It further aims to identify possible barriers to the adequate implementation of MDT and examine any assessments of their impact on the care of persons with VSC. Finally, the review aims to identify possible gaps in the existing research on MDT.

METHODS

Given the broad aim of the research question, a scoping review was conducted to provide an overview and critical analysis of the existing literature on MDT caring for people with VSC. We searched the following databases: CINAHL, Medline, Psychinfo, Scopus, Socindex and Web of Science. The research terms were selected after discussions within the research team and extensive background reading on the topic (see table 1). Inclusion criteria were: published in peer-reviewed journals between 2006 and 2021, written in English, German or French. A 15-year publication window was chosen to capture all studies that were published after the publication of the Chicago consensus statement of 2006. In line with scoping reviews, no restriction was placed on the type of study (theoretical, intervention, quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method). However, book chapters, literature reviews, expert reports, commentaries, conference abstracts and books were excluded. Given that in the medical community the acronym DSD is prevalent, we used it as a search term together with intersex. Terms such as ‘diverse sex development’ and ‘variations of sex development’ were not included in the search query because although these research terms are often relevant for affected persons and activists, they are not yet ingrained in the scientific literature and the preliminary searches gave no additional results when using these terms.

We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines (see figure 1). The combined research of 6 databases gave 415 results and 1 article was added through other sources. After deduplicating (using Zotero) 251 units remained and were further screened on the basis of title and abstract. The articles that referred to intersex or DSD, but did not refer to MDT were excluded. The screening process of the first author was checked and unified with the second author, who confirmed which articles were eligible based on the abstract. The first screening gave 35 results. After that the references of the already selected studies were checked to identify additional studies. This resulted in a final sample of 37 units. In the next step, the first and second authors then read the full-text versions of these articles. Twenty-five records were excluded because they only loosely referred to MDT and either (1) failed to list which healthcare professionals are part of MDT; (2) made no reference to MDT collaboration models; (3) almost exclusively focused on the clinical management or psycho-social care of people with VSC; (4) or discussed the role of only one MDT member, without any description of their collaboration with other team members.

The data from the selected 12 articles were extracted by making a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, secured and available to all team members. The spreadsheet included sections for authors name, year of publication, country of origin, name of the journal, study design, data analysis, key findings, patient age cohort, intersex variation, medical management, psychosocial care, composition of
the team, approaches to collaboration, conceptual issues, ethical framework.

PATIENT AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT STATEMENT
No patients were involved in conducting this study.

RESULTS
General characteristics of included studies
Out of the final 12 articles, 6 were theoretical, 11–16 5 were empirical 17–21 and 1 was a mixed-method study. 9 One-third (4) of the articles were published in the UK, the other third (4) in the USA 13 15 17 20 and the remaining third came from Switzerland and Germany, Sweden and UK, Australia and Germany (see tables 2 and 3).

Only two empirical studies 17 18 addressed MDT in relation to a specific VSC: CAH and 46, XY DSD. Other studies either referred to a wide array of VSC 11–14 20: or provided no specification 9 15 16 19 21 (see table 2).

The majority of studies discussed MDTs in relation to infants and children, 12–15 17–21: Two studies referred to children and adolescents, 16 and only one focused exclusively on adolescents 11 Overall the focus on adolescents was limited and none of the papers discussed MDT in relationship to adults (see table 2).

Except for 17 19 most studies referred to VSC in terms of disorders/differences of sex development and used the acronym without any critical reflection or explanation of it. 9 11–16 18 20 21 Two papers explicitly referred to VSC as a pathology. 11 16
Ideal and actual composition of MDT

According to most theoretical studies MDT ideally consist of an endocrinologist, an urologist and a surgeon.11–16 Some papers also include geneticists,11–14 psychologists,11–15 gynaecologists12–14 and radiologists.11 15 14

However in practice, the core team was composed of endocrinologists,9 17–21 accompanied almost always by urologists/surgeons,9 17 19–21 geneticists,9 18–20 gynaecologists9 19–21 and psychologist/psychiatrists.9 19–21

The vast majority of articles considered multiple methods of medical management as being the task of MDTs: genetic testing (including karyotyping), biomedical assessment (such as hormone levels, blood and urine tests), genital surgery and ultrasounds.11–14 16–21

Less than half of the papers suggest that in the MDTs each specialist is singularly responsible for the medical management.11–14 17 Half of the papers did not specify the responsibility for medical management.9 16 18–21 Only one paper15 argued that specialists should talk to each other about their medical tasks and collaborate with coordinator.

Next to medical management, psychosocial care was considered by six articles to be a key task of MDT. This role was mostly ascribed to psychologists.9 11–13 16 19 In only one paper psychosocial care was said to be provided by all the members of the team.21

Most studies focused on the importance of psychosocial support for parents to help them cope with their child being intersex.11 13 16 Psychologists should provide them information, connect parents to support groups13 16 and function as mediators between parents and healthcare professionals to facilitate the decision-making process.12 13 Ahmed and colleagues11 argued that psychosocial support ought to be provided to people with VSC in general to help them cope with the whole process. Only one empirical study19 focused on psycho-social support as part of MDT. The authors found out that in the initial phases of the multidisciplinary care psycho-social counselling is secondary to medical treatment. What is more psychologists rarely collaborate with medical professionals and the former take on reconciliatory role between medical professionals, patients and parents in the last stages of the care process.

Models of collaboration and barriers

In most studies,11–21 the model of collaboration—multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary—was not explicitly mentioned. Still most of the papers seemed to indicate a multidisciplinary approach in MDTs described as the simultaneous but independent contribution of two or more team members. Two empirical studies19 21 and the mixed-methods study9 show that although participants referred to their team as an MDT or even interprofessional, their responses reflect a disintegrated approach.

In most studies, interaction among team members was mediated by a team coordinator who was responsible for delegating and reviewing tasks.11–18 20
| Author                  | Year | Country | Study design | Patient cohort               | Psychosocial care                                                                 | Composition of team                                                                 | Approaches to collaboration                                                                 | Conceptual issues                                                                 | Ethical framework |
|-------------------------|------|---------|--------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Ahmed et al[1]          | 2016 | UK      | Theoretical  | Adolescents                  | Clinical psychologist should examine early emotions of people with VSC, facilitate adjustment of parents to new-born, informed decision-making process | Endocrinologist, surgeon and/or urologist, clinical psychologist/psychiatrist, radiologist, nurse and neonatologist | Paediatric endocrinologist should take the role of coordinator of sex assignment and decision-making process | Multidisciplinary  | Informed consent |
| Brain et al[2]          | 2010 | UK      | Theoretical  | New-borns                    | Psychologist as mediator between physicians and patients                          | Endocrinologist, (paediatric) urologist/surgeon, gynaecologist, psychologist, biochemist, clinical/molecular geneticist, ethicist | Psychologist has the crucial role, manages the process of communication between physicians and families | Multidisciplinary  | Informed consent and decision-making |
| Gomez-Lobo[3]           | 2014 | USA     | Theoretical  | Infants, children, adolescents | Psychosocial support should cover family support and facilitation of the decision-making process regarding medical treatment | Physician, endocrinologist, nurse, counsellors, geneticist, paediatric urologist, surgeon, radiologist, bioethicist, gynaecologist—focus in this article | A team coordinator is important in the creation of the service as well as ongoing functioning of the team and the team should educate other healthcare professionals | Multidisciplinary  | Shared decision-making |
| Hiort et al[4]          | 2014 | D       | Theoretical  | Infants, children            | /                                                                                | Endocrinologist, surgeon/urologist, psychologist, gynaecologist, geneticist, molecular biologist, radiologist, pathologist, biochemist | Patient navigator coordinates communication between patients/families with the team | Multidisciplinary  | Informed consent |
| Moran and Karkazis[5]   | 2012 | USA     | Theoretical  | Infants, children            | Psychiatrist, and/or social worker can provide early and ongoing psychosocial care and access to support resources for parents and patients | Paediatric endocrinologist, a paediatric urologist and/or surgeon, and a psychologist, psychiatrist, and/or social worker | The development of a team requires coordination in the planning, implementation, and functioning stages, and a team coordinator | Multidisciplinary  | Shared decision-making |

Continued
The most commonly cited ethical principles were informed consent, and shared decision-making. However, only a minority of papers mentioned the involvement of patients in the decision-making process. Out of four papers, three highlighted the importance of patient involvement in informed consent. The (clinical) psychologist can aid in assessing the parents’ and young person’s understanding of information discussed and provide family support in a culturally sensitive manner.

**Table 2 Continued**

| Author                  | Year | Country | Study design | Patient cohort                | Psychosocial care                                                                 | Composition of team                                                                 | Approaches to collaboration                                                                 | Conceptual issues | Ethical framework |
|-------------------------|------|---------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Vora and Srinivasan     | 2010 | AU      | Theoretical  | Neonates, children, adolescents | The (clinical) psychologist can aid in assessing the parents’ and young person’s understanding of information discussed and provide family support in a culturally sensitive manner. | Endocrinologist, urologist, gynaecologist                                               | The biomedical assessment is most often coordinated by the paediatric endocrinologist       | Multidisciplinary | Informed consent |

VSC, variations of sex characteristics.

**Ethical principles of MDTs**

The most commonly cited ethical principles were informed consent, and shared decision-making. However, only a minority of papers mentioned the involvement of patients in the decision-making process. Out of four papers, three highlighted the importance of patient involvement in informed consent. The (clinical) psychologist can aid in assessing the parents’ and young person’s understanding of information discussed and provide family support in a culturally sensitive manner.
| Author            | Year | Country | Study design | Patient cohort | Psychosocial care                                                                 | Composition of team                                                                 | Approaches to collaboration                                         | Conceptual issues                                      | Ethical framework               |
|-------------------|------|---------|--------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Chawla et al       | 2019 | USA     | Empirical    | An infant      | Psychosocial support was provided: risk and benefits including the psychological consequences of having atypical genitalia were reviewed with the family | Endocrinologist, urologist, and paediatric, surgeon, clinical coordinator            | Clinical professional coordinates the team and shared decision-making process | Multidisciplinary              | Shared decision-making         |
| Kyriakou et al     | 2016 | UK      | Empirical    | Children       | /                                                                                | Paediatric endocrinologist, clinical geneticist, paediatrician, neonatologist, adult endocrinologist | Paediatric endocrinologist has the central role in the team           | Multidisciplinary              | Informed consent               |
| Liao and Roen      | 2019 | UK, SE  | Empirical    | Children       | Psychologists’ role is pushed aside in the begging of examination. The psychologist sometimes mediates the emotional mess to prevent patients from disengaging with the service | Gynaecologists, urologists, paediatric surgeons, endocrinologists, geneticists, psychologists and nurse specialists | Team means a collection of specialists—there is no real collaboration, it is rather multi-professional | Multidisciplinary              | /                              |
| Parisi et al       | 2007 | USA     | Empirical    | Infants, children | Psychosocial support for families; parents are given pragmatic, age-appropriate recommendations for disclosure of a diagnosis of a DSD to a child in an honest, non-stigmatising manner | Specialists in medical genetics, cytogenetics, gynaecology, and reproductive endocrinology and the paediatric specialties of urology, endocrinology, adolescent medicine, and psychiatry | The role of geneticists is highlighted and in the initial stages coordinates the team | Multidisciplinary              | Shared decision-making         |
| Sanders et al      | 2017 | UK      | Mixed method | Children, adolescents | The nurse and psychologists are information exchange agents acting in an advocacy role | Endocrinologist and geneticist were always present. In 9 out of 10 clinics urologist and psychologist. Gynaecologists were present in seven clinics, nurse attended three clinics, one site had a nurse as a consistent and integral member of the team | Patients are also educators: general discussions about which topics or concerns were likely to be raised in clinic as issues based on connection to families helped professionals to ‘really think about what’s going to happen in a consultation’ | Interprofessional              | /                              |
The scoping review identified 12 studies that either empirically or theoretically provided an account of MDTs caring for patients with VSC. Almost all articles stressed the importance of MDT, but under closer examination the exact nature of collaboration remained unclear. The prevalent approach seemed to be multidisciplinary, that is, collaboration in which different care providers work simultaneously but separately. The papers rarely elaborated on implementation of multidisciplinarity let alone critically examine it. The teamwork is usually coordinated by an endocrinologist, physician, and in a few instances by a psychologist, even though this was not always empirically assessed. The exact nature of the relationships within the teams and their working practices were not revealed. The studies in our scoping review failed to address these suggestions as there are no indicators to assess the impact of the MDT which could lead to improved care for people with VSC.

Research on MDT in other healthcare contexts suggests that it is not enough to have a unit of different healthcare professionals working together, but the responsibility, knowledge and authority should be flexibly shared and team members should believe in cooperation. However, the studies in our scoping review failed to address these suggestions as there is no indication that it could lead to improved care for people with VSC.

| Author          | Year | Country | Study design | Patient cohort | Psychosocial care | Composition of team                                                                 | Approaches to collaboration | Conceptual issues | Ethical framework |
|-----------------|------|---------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Streuli et al   | 2012 | CH, D   | Empirical    | Children       | Psychosocial care is shared and provided or at least considered by all MDTs       | Paediatric endocrinologist, psychologist, specialist in sexual medicine, child and adolescent psychiatrist, paediatric surgeon, social worker, study nurse, gynaecologist, neonatologist, member of a support group | The team members collaborate with each other, family and the patient | Interprofessional (only pro forma), in reality it is multidisciplinary | Shared and information based decision-making process |

DSD, differences of sex development; MDT, multidisciplinary team.
them. The studies also did not refer to care of adults and transition of care from adolescence to adulthood.

The lack of inclusion of patients’ perspective and preferences in the treatment of people with VSC and shared decision making process in the examined literature is consistent with previous findings. According to these findings, healthcare professionals stated that patient’s perspectives should be an important part of the meetings of the MDT, but do not consider it beneficial to the meetings of MDTs. It is seen to be at the odds with professionals standards, and what is more medical professionals conflate shared decision making process with informed consent or there is no awareness of the former term.

Although some papers aimed to advocate for approach according to which teams educate their patients and even learn from them—the interprofessional approach which seems to de-hierarchise the knowledge relations between patients and medical professionals—they remain a minority within the current literature on medical collaboration in MDTs working with people with VSC.

LIMITATIONS

The scoping review explored the existing literature on MDTs examining the collaboration processes and ethical frameworks. Some relevant studies might have been overlooked due to exclusion/inclusion criteria, for example, conference abstracts and grey literature might have provided information from patients on the MDTs. Nevertheless, our review provides an overview of the existing literature on collaboration of MDT caring for people with VSC and provides important directions for further research that will hopefully lead to better care of people with VSC. Therefore we propose the following suggestions for future research: investigating the role of the healthcare professionals in the teams in the decision making process; examining the nature of relationship between patients and MDTs; examining the lack of care for adults and transition; more research on how MDTs can actually work together; researching new models of collaboration within the MDTs and how they relate to ethical dilemmas working with people with VSC: informed consent versus competence and capacity of children and young people of children and their rights to participate in their treatment.

CONCLUSION

The scoping review revealed that teams caring for people with VSC are seemingly multidisciplinary. The collaboration among them lacks cooperation and synthesised discipline approach as one team member—usually a medical professional (an endocrinologist, a geneticist or a physician), rarely a psychologist or a social worker, coordinates the management process while the rest of the team members seem to work separately. Only a minority of team members come from disciplines such as social work or psychology. The most frequently cited ethical principles are shared decision making and informed consent, but both tend to focus on parents rather than on patients. Future studies should pursue empirical research on MDT by examining in detail the process of shared decision making between MDT, parents, adults and children.

Contributors MG, EdC and JS planned the study. MG as the guarantor took the lead in performing the data analysis, writing the manuscript and doing the scoping literature research. EdC contributed to data analysis, supported the literature research and refined the original manuscript by critically revising it. JS supervised the data analysis and the preparation of manuscript. All authors critically reviewed the final draft of the manuscript.

Funding The authors would like to thank Research Executive Agency (REA)—European Commission for their financial support (859869—INA).

Competing interests None declared.

Patient and public involvement Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or dissemination plans of this research.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval This study does not involve human participants.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Data availability statement No data are available. Not applicable.

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