

RECESSION MEDICINE

With increasing numbers of patients facing unemployment and financial difficulties, some general practices are offering employment and education advice alongside health services.

Ingrid Torjesen reports on the benefits

There are many reasons why the demand for general practice services rises during a recession. People are more likely to attend with problems they would have ignored if they were working. Most importantly, people are more likely to develop physical illnesses when out of work, and unemployment has a psychological impact.^{1,2} Even the threat of redundancy increases sickness,³ and job loss has also been linked to increased risk of heart attacks and stroke in the future.⁴

John Middleton, director of public health at Sandwell Primary Care Trust, says it is really important in times of recession for general practitioners (GPs) to recognise the impact of unemployment and job insecurity and ensure that affected patients receive appropriate care.

“We don’t want people who are facing social and economic problems to be put on to antidepressants and psychotropic medications when their mental health problems are understandable in the context of the social and economic situation they are in,” he says. Instead, Dr Middleton adds, GPs need a range of referral routes to welfare rights, housing, and employment advice because studies have shown that such advice not only helps with everyday living it limits the effects of illness.^{5,6}

Niti Pall, a GP in Sandwell, West Midlands, has seen demand for consultations rise 6-10% at her practice. “We were seeing a lot of low paid workers, but now I am beginning to see many more middle class, settled workers coming in with similar problems. I have had company directors coming in and breaking up completely, people who had big businesses and who have lost everything.”

According to the Office for National Statistics, Sandwell had the highest levels of unemployment in the country in the 12 months to September 2009. Dr Middleton says: “The unemployment rate went up dramatically during the credit crunch because employment in

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the area is at the margin, barely surviving in the best of times. The area is vulnerable to all kinds of recession because its small and medium enterprises can’t borrow money and they stop recruiting.”

Ian Walton, another local GP, says a huge problem for the area is people’s low aspirations. In the past, qualifications were not needed to walk into jobs for life in industry, such as in local foundries, so the reality is tough for young people whose parents did not place much importance on education.

Non-medical support

Dr Walton’s practice in Tipton has a confidence and wellbeing team, which does group work on stress management and building self esteem and confidence. Patients who have attended have had more success in finding work and reported improved happiness and wellbeing.

“If we raise people’s self esteem and teach them how to manage their emotions, they can then cope with life better and actually start getting what they want,” he says.

The same team has trained staff in the local job centre on self esteem, he adds. “By helping them to understand anxiety, mood, and self esteem and all that kind of thing, they are better able to do their jobs.”

Sam Everington is a GP at the Bromley by Bow Healthy Living Centre in east London, which runs about 100 community projects as well as a health centre. “The key five things that we are about are traditional biomedical health, employment, education, creativity, and the environment that people live in. In fact, all five are equally important in terms of the impact that they have on people’s health,” he says.

The centre runs many courses, including English as a second language and a range of national vocational qualifications.

Dr Everington says: “It almost doesn’t matter what training or education you give somebody, but somebody being engaged in education or training is going to be made healthier in the process.”

The centre also houses a job adviser, exercise therapists, and several social enterprise businesses, including landscape gardening,

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graphic design, and furniture. The businesses create employment for local people, and many neighbouring general practices buy services from them.

Dr Everington, a social enterprise ambassador for the Cabinet Office, says: “If someone is depressed the key thing quite often is employment, and as part of their therapy I can say actually I have got a job adviser on site that can help them get a job.”

When he began training as a GP, Dr Everington, says he was frustrated by the narrowness of what he could prescribe. “When you say to a patient, ‘I think you need a social worker’ and they reply, ‘I don’t need a social worker, I need a social worker’s wage’ it kind of brings things to reality. From a doctor’s perspective what is really attractive about it is I have so many more options in terms of what I can refer people to.

“One of the frustrations for GPs is that they often feel at times overwhelmed by demand—the pressure to solve really tough and complex problems. Suddenly there is a whole raft of people who can help you.”

Practical advice in particular can really make a difference to a patient with financial worries (see box). Many general practices now have citizens advice bureaux holding surgeries in their premises, including 90% of practices in Mid Derbyshire Primary Care Trust. Elizabeth Ladimji, head of national partnerships for the Citizens Advice Bureau, would like to see more because they are convenient for patients, who may find it difficult to travel far because of limited finances or mobility issues, and also preserve anonymity. “People sometimes don’t want to be seen to be going to the bureau on the high street because it’s seen as a stigma. In the GP clinic, nobody knows what it is you are going for,” she says.

“We don’t always feel that GPs understand the role of advice in solving problems, so we need to work with primary care trusts to explain to them



In demand: Many general practices now host Citizens Advice Bureaux

Benefits of practical advice at the surgery

The James Wigg Practice in Kentish Town, north London has had an employment adviser since 2001 to give life skills counselling and help people back into employment or into training. Among participants in the scheme, which is funded by the charity Tomorrow's People:

- 80% have found employment within 12 months
- GP consultations have fallen by 20%
- Referrals for counselling are 74% fewer, and
- Prescriptions for antidepressants have reduced by 19%.

Roy Macgregor, one of the practice GPs, says: "By having an employment counsellor sit in the doctor's chair we have found that the patients have faith in the counsellor and trust. They will open up about their problems and their needs more than they will to somebody from the Department of Work and Pensions. If they go and see someone at the department about employment, they get worried that they are going to lose their benefits."

He had expected that most of the referrals would come from GPs fed up with signing medical

certificates, but in fact 70% of people have self referred after seeing advertisements or hearing about the service through word of mouth.

The practice also has Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) advisers, paid for by charity and lottery funding. "We have found that for every £10 000 we spend on paying CAB advisers to come to work here, we can increase the benefits of the people coming to see the CAB adviser by £100 000," Dr Macgregor says.

When claimants get the benefits they are entitled to it has positive repercussions for the whole family: attendance rates for screening and baby clinics rise, and school attendance and immunisation rates also go up.

The practice has also tried to lighten the gloom of the recession through an arts initiative. An Arts Council England grant has enabled it to run exhibitions of local artists and photographers as well as workshops in subjects as diverse as drumming, bookbinding, origami, textiles, and photography.

How the recession has affected general practice

- A MIND survey by Populus of 2050 working adults in England and Wales between 18 and 21 March 2010 found that 1 in 10 workers had visited their GP for support as a direct result of the recession, 7% had started drug treatment for depression, and 5% had seen a counsellor⁷
- GPs report increased demand for consultations, higher rates of depression, and more referrals to counselling services and for practical advice from welfare rights and CAB
- More antidepressant prescriptions were issued last year than ever before; 39.1 million in 2009 compared with 35.9 million in 2008⁸
- Some practices report reduced demand for travel vaccinations and fewer requests for medicals for mortgage applications.
- Patients not on benefits are finding it tough to afford prescriptions for chronic conditions according to an Ipsos MORI survey of 695 people carried out on behalf of Asthma UK⁹

the role of advice. They look at it from a very medical point of view and not holistically."

Mental health

Chris Drinkwater, president of the NHS Alliance, an independent group that represents people working in primary care, admits GPs rarely ask patients whether they are working or have financial concerns. "Adding that to questions that GPs might ask around mental health might be a way forward," he says.

Dr Everington's practice codes whether a patient receives incapacity benefit along with

"We were seeing a lot of low paid workers, but now I am beginning to see many more middle class, settled workers coming in with similar problems" GP, Sandwell

whether they have diabetes or heart disease. By doing this, he says: "You are actively as a GP thinking about how do you stop somebody getting into being permanently sick and how do you get them back into employment."

Last year the government announced it was investing £300m in psychological therapies to help people affected by the recession, but the impact of this has yet to be felt in many areas. So far psychological therapy services have been established in 112 primary care trusts, and by March 2011 every trust is expected to have one, making services available to about 65% of the population.

Health secretary Andrew Lansley says: "The recession has left many people facing tough times. Getting the right support for those grappling with the health effect is critical to the country's recovery. Over a quarter of local health trusts don't yet

have services in place. We want to provide better access to psychological therapies."

However, Professor Drinkwater emphasises that improving access to psychological therapies is not enough. "Yes, you can get people on cognitive behavioural therapy and it will get them thinking a bit more positively about themselves, but unless you do something about the environment in which they live they are just likely to relapse. Without real jobs, decent housing, and adequate incomes people are going to be at risk of becoming ill again."

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