



Physical matters

To tackle the disproportionately poor physical health outcomes among people with severe mental illness, we examine the challenges of supporting this group and increasing their uptake of annual health checks.

It is a truth too often unacknowledged that people with severe mental illness (SMI) die on average 15 to 20 years sooner than the general population. Two thirds of those premature deaths, according to estimates from NHS England (NHSE), are from physical illnesses that can be prevented, such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and hypertension. Rates of smoking are much higher among people with SMI, as are cases of undiagnosed type 2 diabetes. And yet, annual health checks for people with SMI are the exception rather than the rule.

As part of the *Five-Year Forward View for Mental Health*, published in 2016, NHSE expects Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to ensure that 60% of those on the GP SMI register – 280,000 people – receive a “full annual physical health assessment and appropriate follow-up care”. It’s proving to be a difficult goal to reach.

“It’s really important to continually bang the drum”

“We were one of the very few CCGs that just about hit the 60% target last year,” says Dr Angela Moulson, associate clinical director of mental wellbeing at Bradford & Craven CCG in West Yorkshire. It has taken four years of hard work to get there.

It’s a similar story in north-west London: “This is work we have gradually embedded over four to five years,” says Dr Annabel Crowe, Chair of Hounslow CCG. “We’re one of the top in the country, but we’ve still only reached 60% of the local SMI population.”

Bradford and Hounslow have supplied local GPs with a digital template that prompts them to complete a range of health checks – including BMI and blood pressure measurements, tests for blood glucose and lipid levels, and records of alcohol intake and smoking. It also prompts them to start making a recovery and stay well plan. GPs receive a fee for each patient with SMI who receives such an assessment.

But it’s not always easy to get people to attend a check-up. “They may not come because they’re anxious,” says Dr Crowe, “and they may be quite severely disabled as well. Financial incentives on their own don’t make this happen.” Often, what GPs really need is time and confidence that they can have an impact, which is why Hounslow has set up an enhanced GP service to give them just that.

In Bradford, the CCG works closely with the local voluntary and community sector to get across to people with SMI the importance of regular physical health checks and to provide support in attending appointments. “We have found peer support to be very effective,” says Dr Moulson.

However, the virus has meant that progress has stalled. In March, Hounslow had its most successful month ever, reaching 64% of the local SMI population, but things have since gone backwards. It’s the same in Bradford. “It was all going swimmingly,” says Dr Moulson, “but then COVID intervened.”

For Dr Peter Byrne, RCPsych’s lead for public mental health, the failure of so many CCGs to meet what he says is a “modest target of 60%”, even before the pandemic, is a sure sign that things aren’t working. More work is needed to increase the take-up of physical health checks, but there is also a need to tackle wider inequalities in society. “Poverty is the biggest killer,” he says.

Dr Byrne highlights the work of Equally Well, an organisation that seeks to promote and support collaborative action to improve physical health among people with a mental illness. Hosted by the Centre for Mental Health, it is supported by many of the royal medical colleges, including RCPsych, and is run jointly by an expert-by-experience group and a clinical group chaired by former RCPsych president Professor Wendy Burn.

Equally Well has published a charter for equal health that includes a rousing call for action. NHSE expressed an interest in their work during a recent conference call with RCPsych President Dr Adrian James.

A renewed national effort is clearly needed. As Dr Crowe says, “It’s really important to continually bang the drum, because the minute you start, the number of checks goes up a bit. And when you take your finger off, they drift away again.”