

COPD service shows what community pharmacy could deliver

The government is clear that the GP in GP commissioning is for general practice not general practitioner. It's a distinction that matters to other primary care clinicians and allied professionals because if GP commissioning does not include the range of professions, it will fail to deliver its full potential.

This is the view of Stephen Foster, a community pharmacist and founder member of the Healthcare Professionals' Commissioning Network. The aim of the network is to promote the role of its members both by disseminating information about what's possible and by developing models for collaborative working. "We already know that there are exciting possibilities for service change. The challenge will be to innovate in a concerted and co-ordinated way," Foster says.

Foster specialises in COPD and allergy, conditions which could be treated more cost-effectively and with better health outcomes in primary care, he argues.

Of the estimated 2m-3m cases of COPD in England, only around 900,000 are recorded on practice registers. "Many are undiagnosed or misdiagnosed as asthmatic and by the time the symptoms are obvious it's already too late. If we could diagnose the mild cases, some may never go on to become moderate or severe."

Foster offers a screening service for smokers over 35 with 20-a-day habits of 20 years or more. The early results are promising. Of 47 people screened to date, 16 have COPD and of these 10 were previously undiagnosed.

Foster argues that COPD screening services are a natural fit for community pharmacy, which is already acknowledged as the key provider of smoking cessation services.

He believes there is a clear invest-to-save case for COPD screening, but acknowledges that commissioners don't always see it that way. "I have heard the argument that there is no point in improving screening when we can't afford to treat the cases we uncover. But if we leave it until these cases turn into admissions at £2000 a time then we can't afford not to treat them."

Allergy is another area where Foster believes better primary care services could lead to significant savings. "One in three people have an allergy of some kind. Two-thirds of these cases could be treated in primary care, at more convenient time and place for the patient and at lower cost to the NHS. Instead these people are taking a range of symptoms to chest specialists, ENT consultants and dermatologists when an allergist could cure the whole lot."

Foster says that local GPs were enthusiastic supporters of his proposals for an allergy service provided by his business, but he warns that colleagues in some areas have faced resistance from PCTs and hospital consultants. "This is why we are excited about GP commissioning. It could untie our hands," he says.

"Commissioning has to reflect the reality of provision, which is that general practice does not see all the people who need treating. To cover the whole population and particularly those most likely to be affected by health inequalities we need to commission services across the range of primary care settings."

Foster argues both for a cultural change in community pharmacy and a change of mindset on the part of commissioners. "This probably won't be driven by the traditional pharmacy next door to the GP surgery, nor is it true that just because you make a good business case someone will go ahead and commission the service, but we are beginning to see a groundswell of support," he says.

Foster cites the Pharmacy Clinical Leadership Network, which now has 118 members and at least four or five in each SHA region. "We're aiming to get the network to 150 local champions. At that point, it will be difficult to ignore."

For details of the networks mentioned in this article see www.networks.nhs.uk.



Stephen Foster
pharmacy superintendent
Pierremont Pharmacy

5

Social enterprise: focus on health

The essential event for anyone considering setting up a social enterprise in the health and social care sectors. Free to NHS delegates.

10 November, London.
For details see
www.pcc.nhs.uk/events