

Out of Hours

Health promotion at the heart of our communities:

good for patients; good for doctors

STREET DOCTORING

On a damp July morning last year armed with blood pressure machines, scales, custom-made leaflets, enthusiasm, and purpose, our team of 12 GP trainees set up a stall in the heart of Newham town centre. We were on a mission to educate and help people reconnect with their health and the British weather and initial challenges of engaging with the public and finding appropriate sites, did not dampen our energy.

With umbrellas, raincoats, and the willingness of the people of Newham to engage, we continued unabated. From our makeshift stall, divided into three subteams; Measurements, Education, and Coaching, we invited passersby to have their height, weight, and blood pressure checked. Once they had had their measurements taken, they were then directed to the 'Education and Coaching Zones' where members of the Street Doctor team provided lifestyle advice (diet, exercise, and smoking cessation) and/or health coaching.

GOOD FOR PATIENTS

In total, 71 members of the public took part in the Street Doctor initiative and our trained health coach doctors were able to provide brief 10-minute health coaching sessions to 26 people. We identified 28 people with raised body mass index and 23 with raised blood pressure (10 of these people having no previous history of known hypertension). Members of the public were given lifestyle advice and recommended to see their own GP. We also provided advice on smoking cessation to eight smokers. Afterwards, all of those who received the health coaching reported increased motivation levels to improve their health.

GOOD FOR DOCTORS

Our survey showed that 100% of the doctors taking part enjoyed the experience with 92% feeling it increased their motivation to improve patient health, 73% reporting it improved morale and the public's relationship with GPs, and over half noting that the experience improved their communication and teambuilding skills.

All of the doctors who took part said they would recommend Street Doctor and/or similar group health promotion activities to other trainees and GPs. This is encouraging at a time when work-related stress levels among GPs in the NHS are so high.¹

The essence of Street Doctor is about promoting holistic care and increasing motivation to improve health. A British Medical Association survey¹ found in 2015 that 51% of GPs and 64% of GP trainees rank holistic care among the top three factors that they feel are essential components of general practice. A recent pilot study² found that patients reported that following health coaching they felt more motivated to make changes in their lives. Whether these changes are sustained when health coaching sessions cease isn't known, but the pilot shows that the coaching approach has the ability to motivate people to take responsibility for making changes to their lives, at least in the short term. A longer-term assessment of changes in behaviour and clinical outcomes is needed since evidence on this is limited in the UK.²

CREATING TIME AND GAINING SKILLS FOR HEALTH PROMOTION ENERGISES PRIMARY CARE

Community health promotion projects such as Street Doctor, utilising patient metrics, education, and coaching, have the potential to help improve health education and increase people's motivation to improve their own health.

Our survey revealed that doctors also really enjoyed participating, deriving many benefits including greater morale and motivation to improve the health of their patients. There certainly appears to be an appetite among our group to become equipped with skills such as coaching. The pilot study² also found that GP trainees trained in health coaching reported shifts in their consultation style with increased knowledge about coaching and confidence in using this approach in clinical practice. They are more likely to promote self care and do so more effectively since they felt they had the tools and skills needed to support self-management and empower people.

If community health promotion activities such as Street Doctor, are good for patients and good for doctors is it not time we create more time and space for health promotion?

We are at a point in time when GP work-related stress levels are significant¹ and NHS morale is clearly low. Projects such as Street Doctor have the potential to improve health education, help patients reconnect

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with their health and their GPs and also for doctors themselves to reconnect with their own mission to improve public health!

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