With one in four GP consultations arranged purely for social reasons, the medical model falls short of delivering the excellent care that our patients need and that healthcare professionals strive to deliver. Social prescribing (SP) is not an argument against the importance of clinical interventions — it has been developed to complement and work alongside the medical model, to address unmet needs. Moreover, it has the potential to play a key role in tackling the social determinants of health, estimated to account for approximately 80% of the modifiable factors contributing to health outcomes for a population.

With personalised care highlighted as a top priority within the recently published NHS Long Term Plan; 2019 truly is the year of SP. With the addition of 1000 trained link-workers, the NHS has promised to extend the benefits to over 2.5 million patients within the next 5 years.

UNITED WITH A COMMON VISION
In spite of these recent encouraging policy changes, a critical challenge still remains. How do we foster an attitudinal change to shift the power to the people and local communities? How do we prevent lack of engagement? How do we forge cross-sectoral collaboration, and how do we ensure SP continues to grow as a grassroots movement? Working in partnership with patients is crucial, even more so in an era where information is readily available on the internet. The world’s first SP Day (held on 14 March 2019) was designed to unite key stakeholders with a common vision in order to address some of the aforementioned challenges. Official plans were launched in 2018 through a speech at the King’s Fund ‘Social Prescribing Coming of Age’ annual event — a gift from the NHS England National Social Prescribing Student Champion Scheme and its collaborators on the NHS’s 70th birthday.

“A KEY MILESTONE IN OUR JOURNEY
Internationally, SP was celebrated in 11 countries including Canada, Finland, the US, and Brazil. The Ontario Alliance for Healthier Communities in Canada hosted a ‘Social Prescribing 101’ webinar, while students in Brazil raised awareness through coffee stands in hospitals. Regional events in the UK took place, including the North East Regional Social Prescribing Conference, and 18 other student-led conferences and seminars.

However, it is the hundreds of events organised locally by voluntary organisations and community groups that inspired us the most. Be it through free entry for residents at the Brontë Museum exhibition in Yorkshire, a disco dancing group for older people in Northern Ireland, a community networking event in Wales, or a ukulele band in Oxenhope, West Yorkshire, the voices of those with lived experiences of SP echoed loud and clear.

By reaching a total of 29 million people through an excess of 11 000 social media posts and trending third in the UK on social media platforms, our campaign has achieved its goal of spreading the word about SP and its benefits. The world’s first SP Day is a key milestone in our journey towards achieving person-centred care and a pause for thought for all of us, bringing clarity to how we will face the challenges ahead.

SP has come a long way, and has much further to go, but one thing is certain: SP and personalised care are here to stay. Through a grassroots approach, we are committed to working with communities and patients to understand what truly matters to them.

Co-creating the future of health care, the SP movement acts as an elastic band, stretching and generating force over time, and resulting in long-lasting change.

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