

Evidence and methods required to evaluate the impact for patients who use social prescribing: a rapid systematic review and qualitative interviews

Lena Al-Khudairy,^{1*} Abimbola Ayorinde,¹
Iman Ghosh,¹ Amy Grove,¹ Jenny Harlock,¹
Edward Meehan,² Adam Briggs,¹ Rachel Court¹
and Aileen Clarke¹

¹Division of Health Sciences, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

²School of Public Health and Prevention Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

*Corresponding author lena.al-khudairy@warwick.ac.uk

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Plain English summary

Impact of social prescribing for patients

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Background

Social prescribing involves connecting patients to non-medical sources of support in the community to improve their health and well-being. One way of doing this is through referral to a social prescribing 'link worker', who helps the person to identify appropriate local support. Since 2019, local groups of general practices (Primary Care Networks) have received funding to employ one social prescribing link worker each.

Aim

This study investigates what evidence and methods would be needed to assess and understand the impact of a link worker for patients who use social prescribing in England.

Methods

We undertook a review of existing research and interviews with 25 people working in social prescribing. Two virtual workshops were held with researchers, people delivering social prescribing and people with lived experience of social prescribing services.

Findings

Social prescribing schemes differ widely in the way that patients are referred, the range of community support available and the type of evidence collected to assess the impact of these schemes. This creates challenges for assessing the impact of social prescribing. The current evidence that is collected and recorded in a similar way tells us very little about the effectiveness of social prescribing on patients. COVID-19 is further changing social prescribing.

Conclusion

We suggest five options for future research. Examples of research include comparing groups of general practices that do and do not use social prescribing link workers to see if using social prescribing link workers are more effective for patients. We also make recommendations for different ways of evaluating the value for money of social prescribing.

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