

Impact of a social prescribing intervention in North East England on adults with type 2 diabetes: the SPRING_NE multimethod study

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Plain language summary

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Why we did this research

Social prescribing happens when health-care staff refer patients to a link worker. Link workers support and help patients to access community services to improve their health and well-being. Social prescribing is popular within the NHS, but there is little evidence that it works. We looked at a social prescribing model being delivered in a disadvantaged area in north-east England.

What we did

We used different methods to find out if social prescribing improved health and well-being:

- We compared data from medical records of over 8000 patients with type 2 diabetes whose general practice used social prescribing with data from similar patients in surgeries that did not. Data included blood pressure and blood glucose control. We also calculated if social prescribing was good value for money.
- We spent time with link workers and patients observing their routines and interviewing them about their experiences.

What we found

In general practices that accessed social prescribing, blood glucose control for people with type 2 diabetes improved by a small but statistically significant amount. Other health outcomes did not improve significantly. Social prescribing cost more than usual care.

Patients who were given support that matched their needs could achieve positive changes and deal with social and health-related problems, for example getting benefit entitlements helped with reducing anxiety. However, providing the right type of support was time-consuming and challenging because of the high caseload of link workers and because many patients were living in difficult circumstances.

What it means

This model of social prescribing improved blood glucose control for people with type 2 diabetes but was not necessarily good value for money. Social prescribing provided other important benefits, such as support to connect with community services that help improve health and well-being, but it was challenging to deliver and its effects were difficult to measure and varied from patient to patient.

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