



Synopsis

Implementation of link workers in primary care: Synopsis of findings from a realist evaluation

Stephanie Tierney,^{1*} Geoff Wong,¹ Debra Westlake,¹ Amadea Turk,¹
Steven Markham,¹ Jordan Gorenberg,¹ Joanne Reeve,²
Caroline Mitchell,³ Kerry Husk,⁴ Sabi Redwood,⁵ Tony Meacock,¹
Catherine Pope,¹ Beccy Baird⁶ and Kamal Mahtani¹

¹Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

²Hull York Medical School, University of Hull, Hull, UK

³School of Medicine and Population Health, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

⁴Peninsula Medical School, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

⁵Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

⁶The King's Fund, Cavendish Square, London, UK

*Corresponding author stephanie.tierney@phc.ox.ac.uk

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Approximately, one in five people see their general practitioner with problems that are social (e.g. loneliness), environmental (e.g. housing) or economic (e.g. debt). These 'non-medical' issues can affect how someone feels (physically or mental health wise). Social prescribing is one way to help. It involves connecting people to 'community assets' (e.g. a local group to meet others and an organisation that provides advice on housing/finances). Link workers are employed to deliver social prescribing in primary care. They meet with a patient (usually more than once) to find out what is happening in this person's life and what they want to change/address. Link workers can connect patients to relevant community support or services.

Our research focused on how link workers are being used in primary care. We collected data around seven link workers based in different parts of England. We spent 3 weeks with each link worker. We watched these link workers meeting with patients, healthcare staff and voluntary–community sector representatives. We also conducted interviews with 93 professionals (working in primary care or the voluntary–community sector) and 61 patients. We reinterviewed 41 patients, 9–12 months later, along with 7 link workers and a link worker manager.

Key ideas from our data included: (1) link workers are an ongoing source of support for patients, who are relied on to listen to their difficulties; (2) link workers need flexibility in how they work to best assist patients and to develop a good working relationship with healthcare colleagues and (3) patients trust link workers to support them.

Our study shows important changes needed to support link workers. These include: (1) establishing a clear definition of the job; (2) providing adequate supervision and training and (3) ensuring link workers have time to focus on non-medical issues and to develop relationships with community providers.

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