

“Pop down your local” for health care

Community pharmacists in Rotherham are involved in an initiative to improve men's health. **Debbie Andalo** spoke to those involved

Community pharmacists in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, are involved in the initiative which has been launched as part of this month's "Pop down your local" campaign by Developing Patient Partnerships — the national organisation devoted to improving the relationship between health professionals and their patients.

Patient information flyers (see Panel) are being distributed either attached to prescriptions for male patients or included in the paper bag when customers buy over-the-counter medicines at the pharmacy. The flyers suggest that men discuss any health issues they may have with their community pharmacist. A short quiz for men to discover whether they need more information about their medicines, with the suggestion they should talk to the pharmacist, also appears on the flyer. The quiz is based on the questions that were included in the Government-backed "Ask about medicines week" campaign last October.

Posters advertising the "Pop down your local" campaign and general health promotion leaflets, including details of the Government's five-a-day healthy diet programme, have also been distributed to the 46 Rotherham pharmacies involved in the campaign.

At the same time two health promotion stalls, suggesting how community pharmacists can help men with issues such as sexual health or sports injuries, have been set up at a local further education college and in a healthy living centre.

Untapped source of information

Rotherham primary care trust prescribing support pharmacist Isobel Bancroft developed the scheme which is being evaluated with the help of pharmacy technician Michael Rodgers. Mrs Bancroft said: "We want to be able to point men in the direction of their local pharmacist if they need health advice. Community pharmacists are really an untapped source of health information and can advise about most health needs. And if they can't help then they can refer to another health professional who can."

She said community pharmacists were in a good position to offer health advice because patients sometimes felt they were more approachable than a GP and no appointment was required.

Mrs Bancroft added: "The pharmacy isn't such a formal environment as a GP consulting room and a lot of pharmacies now have an area where they can offer confidential health advice. There is so much that a pharmacist can be doing now in the community — their role is really expanding and it's important that we can draw patients' attention

to the work they can do in health promotion at the same time improve the profile of the community pharmacist."

Community pharmacist Jonathan McGill, whose Wath-Upon-Dearne pharmacy has been involved in the scheme, said getting in-

involved in health promotion was a role which the profession has coveted for years.

He said: "Linking pharmacy with health promotion recognises the contribution which pharmacists can play and I think that recognition is going to take us a long way. It is something which we have craved for a long time. We have always said that we can do these things and now that message is getting home."

He said the scheme was valuable because it targeted young men. He added: "Highlighting the health risks for young men and offering them advice on lifestyle changes is a development because in the past it is something we have done with older male patients when they pick up their prescriptions. That is perhaps the wrong way round because we should be getting these messages across to healthy young men."

Increasing pharmacists' role

Keith Boughan, associate director of the Wentworth locality in the PCT, said he hoped the men's health initiative was only the beginning of the move towards increasing the role of pharmacists in the community.

He said: "I think some patients have needed to be convinced that doctors are not the only people to deliver health care and health advice, and I think this initiative has given pharmacists a significant opportunity to become more involved in the process."

"Men generally don't like to be seen to be going to the doctors but this scheme gives them the chance to go to see the pharmacist instead and have a discussion over the counter or in private, as many pharmacists now have consulting rooms as well."

This view was shared by Kristin McCarthy, director of the DPP, which, together with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and other organisations, launches the "Pop down your local" campaign on April 29. She said: "The accessible and confidential services offered by pharmacists are ideal for men seeking on-the-spot advice for minor ailments as well as general health and lifestyle information."

Mrs Bancroft added: "Historically, I think men feel they don't need to or don't like going to the doctor, and although I think may be that is changing with the younger generation, there is still this issue about men accessing health services."

The Rotherham initiative has cost around £500 and could easily be copied by other primary care trusts, she said. "It's not expensive and I think it is part of my responsibilities as a prescribing support pharmacist. It's not rocket science."

Mr McGill agreed: "It's dirt cheap — it's a gift."

Rotherham PCT's campaign flyer: "Men and pharmacy"

The "Men and pharmacy" campaign flyer contains the following information:

Did you know that

- Heart disease causes 22 per cent of deaths in men less than 75 years?
- Lung cancer accounts for 27 per cent of all deaths caused by cancer in men?
- 15 to 20 per cent of men in the UK report chronic cough and phlegm production?
- Diabetes and smoking are just two of many causes of erectile dysfunction?

But

- Many factors that increase risk of coronary heart disease can be controlled
- Stopping smoking decreases your chances of developing lung cancer significantly
- Chronic lung diseases can be managed successfully if diagnosed correctly
- Erectile dysfunction can now be treated in several ways

So

- Simple lifestyle changes and education can improve your health significantly
- Your community pharmacist can often sort problems with disease management including medication
- The sooner you bring up the problem the sooner it can be sorted out

If the answer is "no" to any of the following questions it may be time to ask about your medicines

Do you know

- What medicines you are taking and why?
- How and when to take them?
- Whether or not any of your medicines react with each other, or food or alcohol?

So ask your pharmacist

- What does this medicine do?
- How long will I need to use it?
- When should I take it?
- Should I avoid any other medicines, drinks, foods or activities when I am taking this medicine?
- What are the possible risks and side effects and what should I do if they happen to me?