

Study update, June 2022

The link worker role in primary care

Welcome to our June 2022 update, designed to inform our project partners, public contributors and other interested parties about progress on the research we are conducting to answer important questions about the role of link workers in primary care (sometimes known as social prescribers or community navigators).

They are employed to support people with non-medical needs (e.g. loneliness, financial worries, housing problems).



The study, funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), is led by Stephanie Tierney and Kamal Mahtani, both of whom work at the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford. It is focusing data collection around link workers based in six different parts of the country (study sites).

Where are we in progressing the research?

Data collection is continuing to progress well. We are collecting data around 6 cases (link workers) based in different parts of the country. We have now completed data collection from the 3rd and 4th cases. This has involved spending time with link workers in-person and interviewing people they work with (e.g. healthcare professionals, voluntary-community sector organisations, patients).

Data collection is helping us to think about a range of topics including: how to integrate link workers into a GP's practice, how to make patients aware of the role of link workers, how to support link workers in primary care, how link workers meet the expectations of a range of people (e.g. healthcare professionals, patients, voluntary sector organisations).

One of the problems we have had with data collection is recruiting patients to take part in an interview. We hoped to interview 10 patients for each case (link worker). This has proved more difficult than anticipated. We wonder whether this relates to how patients see the link worker role. Some have recalled how this interaction has been transformative and helped them in a really difficult part of their life to move forwards. Other patients have described how they valued the link worker listening to their concerns. However, communication with a link worker is not often face-to-face and can be quite short (20 minutes). Therefore, it is not always a memorable interaction, and several patients were unsure that the person they had seen was a link worker (even though this individual had seen them). This highlights a lack of understanding among the public about this role.

Meetings

We met with our advisory group in April 2022. This group is composed of people with an interest in social prescribing (e.g. healthcare professionals, link workers, voluntary sector providers). It provides us with helpful suggestions and comments on the research as it progresses. Issues covered in this meeting included a discussion of some key issues arising from completed data collection and preparations for our work with new sites.

We met with our Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) group in May 2022. At this meeting, we talked about PPI group members producing a blog on their contribution to and their reflections on the study. We discussed the aims of the blog and its intended audience. We agreed the blog should be accessible to a broad range of individuals, including patients, policy makers and practitioners. At this meeting, there was also a rich discussion on how defined the role of a link worker should be in job descriptions to help them feel embedded in primary care. In particular, we talked about whether there should be clearly delineated tasks for a link worker or a more loose definition of the role to enable link workers to accommodate the needs of a practice.

Session on diversity in research and PPI

The research team were pleased to be provided with a training session on PPI with diverse populations. The training was delivered by Dr Kate Fryer from the University of Sheffield. It was an enlightening session that covered several ways to conduct inclusive health research.

Dr Fryer presented research on the barriers and facilitators to inclusive health research with diverse populations. In her presentation, she discussed having an awareness of historical factors that can deter certain groups from being involved in research, using appropriate terminology and language, and the importance of fostering trust and understanding in targeted communities. While there are many barriers to inclusive research, there are effective actions that researchers can take, such as building partnerships with the target population when planning a project and utilising local knowledge.

Dr Fryer invited a community advocate from a PPI group she works with to speak about her experience of participating in PPI groups. It was incredibly helpful to hear first-hand how this person thought researchers could better engage a range of people in a study.

In July, a member of our research team, Stephanie Tierney, will be meeting with a PPI group that Dr Fryer helps to co-ordinate in Sheffield, to talk about the link worker study.

Publications

Members of our research team have been involved in some recent publications that relate to the link worker role:

1. Kerryn Husk, Stephanie Tierney and Kamal Mahtani are authors on a paper published in BMJ Global Health. Its title is '[Global developments in social prescribing](#)'. The paper provides an overview of how social prescribing is being implemented in different parts of the world.
2. Debra Westlake is first author on a paper published in Health and Social Care in the Community. Its title is '[Impact of COVID-19 on social prescribing across an Integrated Care System: A Researcher in Residence study](#).' It talks about experiences of collecting data on social prescribing during the pandemic. Debra has also produced a blog on this paper, which can be found on our webpage for the study.
3. A member of our PPI group, Bernard Gudgin, has produced a [reflective blog](#) about the study and its focus on the link worker role.

Meet the research team

We wanted, in these updates, to introduce you to various members of our research team. In this edition, Jordan Gorenberg, one of the researchers involved in data collection and analysis, provides an insight into his interests:

Hi everyone, my name is Jordan. I've been primarily responsible for conducting patient interviews on this project.

I'm originally from Alameda, California, an island directly east of San Francisco. Outside of work, I am heavily involved in the Oxford music scene. Most recently, I performed as house pianist for Katie Melua's the Silk Roads Project at the Sheldonian Theatre, working with singer-songwriters to craft new songs inspired by Peter Frankopan's book.

I am a member of the Green Templeton College Big Band, the Oxford Keytones, and lead my own jazz quintet called Gorenberg Quintet.

To find out more about Gorenberg Quintet or to watch clips from our performances, [please check out our Instagram page](#).



Stay in touch

If you would like any more information about this project, please see our [project page](#) or do not hesitate to contact:

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of their host institution, organisations mentioned or the study's funder.