

# Social prescribing in the GP surgery

**Simon Lennane**, General Practitioner, Alton Street Surgery, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire; Mental Health GP Lead, Locality Lead, South Herefordshire, Herefordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, GP Champion, South Locality

There is increasing recognition of the value of community to the health of our population, and links between medicine and community groups have become known as 'social prescribing'. This term describes the use of non-medical sources of support, and the recent NHS Long Term Plan rightly encourages social prescribing as an important strategy within health (NHS England, 2019; *Box 1*). This has a role to play in both prevention of ill-health and recovery from an episode of illness. The arts, music, sport and other group-based activities all have an important role to play in keeping people well, and the challenge will now be making connections between health and voluntary organisations, often known as the 'third sector'.

I'd been using social prescribing before I ever heard the term! Ross-on-Wye is famous for our charity shops, and I often suggested volunteering for a few hours, for patients recovering from illness, especially mental health difficulties. It is a good way to build up confidence without feeling too much pressure, and many patients found the social contact (and the fact you could work in the back of the shop, if you didn't feel like interacting) helpful in recovering.

We also have a community garden, funded by a local fruit grower, which offers similar opportunities for people who like being outdoors—somehow, the social norms working outside are different, and this is a great leveller.

It has been really heartening to see social prescribing now entering the mainstream, although often what we are talking about is rediscovering our shared



Pharmaceutical beds at Chelsea Physic Garden: somehow, the social norms working outside are different, and this is a great leveller.

sense of community, and we're now realising how important this is within health care.

The economics of health care mean that prevention usually costs much less than treatment, and many people would agree that the exercise from gardening or an allotment is preferable to pills for blood pressure.

We recognise the benefits of eating well, connecting with others, and of taking an active role in a community, but making changes isn't always easy in busy lives. Having a local directory of

services is key to making change as easy as possible for our patients.

We know that loneliness has a significant impact on health—statistically, being lonely is as dangerous to health as smoking. It can take time to build up local relationships within both rural and urban communities, but there are ways to make new connections. Churches and faith groups have established networks that support many people, while local papers and parish magazines highlight the things going on near us.

Alongside this, local social networks such as [nextdoor.co.uk](http://nextdoor.co.uk) are gaining users, providing ways for neighbours to communicate and get to know each other, which is particularly helpful in difficult times, such as the snowy weather we saw last year.

**“We know that loneliness has a significant impact on health—statistically, being lonely is as dangerous to health as smoking”**

## Box 1. Social prescribing in the NHS Long Term Plan

**Introduction** (page 6): 'Within five years, over 2.5 million more people will benefit from "social prescribing", a personal health budget, and new support for managing their own health in partnership with patients' groups and the voluntary sector.'

**1.40.** 'As part of this work, through social prescribing, the range of support available to people will widen, diversify and become accessible across the country. Link workers within primary care networks will work with people to develop tailored plans and connect them to local groups and support services. Over 1000 trained social prescribing link workers will be in place by the end of 2020–2021, rising further by 2023–2024, with the aim that over 900 000 people are able to be referred to social prescribing schemes by then.'

**2.35.** 'Young carers say they feel invisible and often in distress, with up to 40% reporting mental health problems arising from their experience of caring. Young carers should not feel they are struggling to cope on their own. The NHS will roll out "top tips" for general practice which have been developed by young carers, which include access to preventive health and social prescribing, and timely referral to local support services. Up to 20 000 young carers will benefit from this more proactive approach by 2023–2024.'

Source: NHS England, 2019

Lunch clubs and Good Neighbour schemes bring people together, and it is useful being able to suggest these to patients, especially those who may be more vulnerable. In rural locations, small groups of parishes working together will know which people would benefit from support. There is good evidence that volunteering has benefits to volunteers themselves, as well as the people they help. Spending a spare hour or two assisting in a charity shop brings companionship as well as the satisfaction of doing something useful. Many people would like to be able to do more to help others, and we need to find ways to make it easier for people to give their time.

Social models such as parkrun are making exercise accessible to many more people, with the sense of community a strong reason for people to keep coming back. Parkrun is a weekly, informal 5k run (or walk) on a Saturday morning, led by volunteers, with one volunteer following at the end so no one comes last! The parkrun.com site shows where your nearest parkrun takes place, and some organisations stage an occasional 'takeover' by providing the volunteers, which is great fun and a good way to build a team.

Groups working in the outdoors provide ways of learning practical skills and enjoying our countryside in good company. Many people find being outdoors breaks down social barriers, and being part of a group working with a common purpose is a powerful way of building relationships, which often continue into other settings. There are other groups addressing more particular health needs, such as Leg Clubs, which

offer a similar approach for wound care. In Herefordshire, where I work, we have two Dementia Meeting Centres. This model, originally from the Netherlands, brings together people with dementia and their carers for quality time and shared activities, and has been shown to reduce hospital admissions.

GP surgeries have always used the resources in our communities, but it can be hard to know everything that goes on in our towns and villages. Many surgeries now have social prescribers to address the health problems caused by loneliness and isolation. These practitioners work alongside clinicians to explore options for people whose circles are more limited, often after loss or bereavement, or when recovering from an episode of poor mental health (see Box 2).

A group of patients at the surgery where I work have continued to meet, years after our local Poetry Festival ran a poetry workshop for our patients. During this time, they have become friends, gone to events together and supported each other through difficult times, as well as writing some wonderful poetry. Not all activities will suit every patient, so having a range of options available is ideal.

Working within health, we are privileged to see first hand the intricate web of connections that helps us support each other. Encouraging links with groups who provide activity, companionship and creativity will help our patients live as well as possible. **BJHCA**

### References

NHS England. NHS Long Term Plan. 2019. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-term-plan/> (accessed 22 February 2019)

## Box 2. Case study: say it with flowers

A patient with a chronic mental health condition was struggling after her partner left. She supports a number of other people, but is also potentially vulnerable. She has been unable to work for many years, but expressed a wish to do some volunteering.

She had a session with our social prescriber, who went through her interests and put her in touch with a local church to help with flower arranging, which she is enjoying. This has opened up her social networks and is helping to build her confidence



The author, Ross-on-Wye general practitioner, Simon Lennane: 'I'd been using social prescribing before I ever heard the term!'

Follow him on Twitter: @SimonLennane

### Resources

Dementia Meeting Centres: <https://www.meetingdem.eu/>

Good Neighbour: <https://www.goodneighbour.uk.com/>

Leg Clubs: <https://www.legclub.org/>

Lunch clubs: <https://tinyurl.com/y3qbr2o4>

Nextdoor: <https://nextdoor.co.uk/>

Parkrun: <http://www.parkrun.org.uk/>

**"Many people would like to be able to do more to help others, and we need to find ways to make it easier for people to give their time"**