

College of Medicine Beyond Pills Campaign feature

From helping with finances to finding local activities, a former nurse turned link worker reveals how her role is making a difference to one London community

Until autumn 2019, Gay Palmer had never heard of social prescribing. 'Then I opened a job description online and thought "I could do that". It was a light bulb moment - I realised the role of social prescribing link worker really encapsulates all I've been doing.'

A trained nurse, Gay had also worked in community nursing and social work – all skills that were transferable to social prescribing. Once she was aware of the opportunities, Gay found more information on the NHS England website and the Social Prescribing Network, as well as job ads on Linked In and the Guardian jobs website.

Together with three others, Gay was recruited for the first social prescribing link worker team at South Southwark Primary Care Network just as Covid started to rampage across the country. They had their first training before lockdown, with eight modules online covering how to communicate and interact with the voluntary care sector, clinical training and policies.

Normally, the team would be based in a GP practice – South Southwark comprises 18 practices – and physically meet the patients referred to them by the doctors, practice nurses and pharmacists, as well as physiotherapists and even receptionists. **GAY CAN PATIENTS SELF REFER?** But lockdown meant that it was all online for the first ten months.

Gay describes the role of a link worker as 'having the ability to be a listening ear for someone so they can share their lows and highs. We're pals. We don't tell them what to do; we just listen without judging and we take time to go through things with them.'

Many patients confess they feel helpless and hopeless. Then the question Gay tries to answer is: 'how do I help this person see life differently? Often they feel separate – powerless to do anything - so our role is to help them connect the dots of their lives. Say they are waiting for housing – we may not be able to help with that but we might be able to put in something they can do that makes them feel better while they wait, such as practicing mindfulness.'

Patients are referred with both physical and mental health conditions. There may be one thing on the form but invariably 'that's the tip of the iceberg,' says Gay, and under the surface everything in their lives is affected. One woman came with sleeping problems, which weren't helped by drugs. Because she'd had to give up work she didn't do anything all day and, in a vicious circle, her low mood dipped further and made her insomnia worse. Gay found free local activities that she could join in with, which she had no idea existed but began to turn her life around.

'If people's finances are restricted, it generally affects everything else. Unemployment keeps people at home because they can't afford to go out. Then they often lose touch with others, which also affects their mood.' Pills can't help with those underlying problems but Gay's team can. Thanks to a collaboration with Citizens Advice Bureau, two of her now 14-strong team specialise in money management and debt advice.

In several current cases, Gay's team are supporting single parents with the shame of getting into debt and not feeling able to tell their teenage children. 'Which adds to the pressure they're living under.' One father of 48 came to the team in despair: 'he told us he feels like a dead man walking'. He works three jobs to pay for his two children to go to university including fees, accommodation, travel and food. His children, unaware of his mounting debts, were saying 'Dad, you need to make payment'. Gay's specialist team was able to help with the practical side of dealing with his finances as well as supporting him to confide in his children and ameliorate his desperate state of mind.

Gay and her team see their work as rooted in the power of community: 'it's a very isolated and lonely world if you can't rely on neighbourhood networks. I was raised by the whole community where I grew up in the Midlands. I see what we're doing as building back community networks.'

Gay Palmer

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