Improving Access to Eye Care for Hard-to-Reach Groups: Designing a Quality Improvement Project for a Challenging Issue

Dr Rory Nicholson
Ophthalmology Specialty Registrar, Wessex Deanery
rory.nicholson@nhs.net

Background
Hard-to-reach, or seldom-heard, groups are cohorts of people who are under-represented in a service. The Health and Social Care Act (2012) introduced a new duty on the Secretary of State, NHS England and clinical commissioning groups ‘to have regard to the need to reduce inequalities in access to care and outcomes of care, and this need is reflected in the new Sustainability and Transformation Plans for Dorset and Hampshire. The Wessex Local Eye Health Network (LEHN) is a multi-professional body including optometrists, ophthalmologists, and representatives from NHS England, Public Health England, Healthwatch, local authorities, and third sector organisations. The LEHN set out with the aim of improving eye healthcare service for hard-to-reach groups in the Wessex region, in order to reduce inequality of access to eye and vision care.

Initial brainstorming
Hard-to-reach groups differ depending on the service being considered. In order to identify groups at risk of being under-served by eye healthcare services in Wessex, the LEHN referred to a 2016 report by the Surrey and Sussex LEHN which identified 13 groups.2 The 10 members of the LEHN present then discussed the likely relevance of each of the categories for the local population, considering likely size of groups, burden of disease, and accessibility to intervention with the resources available. Members of the group voted for the categories they felt were most amenable to intervention. Voting for more than one group was permitted. The results are displayed here in a Pareto chart. Homeless groups were felt by the group to be most amenable to a targeted intervention.

Plan
A plan was made during a meeting including the LEHN, NHS England, Healthwatch Hampshire and Wessex Voices. Resources included reports from a previous projects in London3 and a feasibility study in Wales.4 The driver diagram opposite was used to inform a plan which incorporates 4 of the change ideas (highlighted in red).

An optometrist will be contracted one day per week to visit selected homeless shelters within Wessex. In an appropriate setting, they will provide the service to any homeless residents who request it. They will be funded to perform a GDOS sight test, and prescribe glasses to be dispensed free of charge to patients. If appropriate, they will refer the patient to local Hospital Eye Services for further assessment. The initial project timescale will be 1 year. The optometrist will collect data to support assessment of the project (see Measuring Outcomes).

Baseline
The nature of homelessness makes accurate data collection difficult. Official figures record an estimate of 147 rough sleepers across Wessex in 2016, based on street counts. Between October and December 2016, Wessex Local Authorities processed 1038 benefits applications from eligible homeless applicants.5 There are no data on how many homeless people have received a recent sight test locally. A survey sent by the LEHN to all local optometric practices regarding frequency of homeless attendees had too low a response rate to yield useful data.

Measuring Outcomes
Selecting appropriate outcome measures is challenging. The more distal outcome measures, such as improved visual function, quality of life, and re-employment would be prohibitively difficult to measure. Instead, pragmatic outcome measures were chosen: patient satisfaction, number of episodes, number of glasses dispensed and number of referrals to hospital eye services.

Sustainability
In its current form the project is not sustainable; nor is it designed to be. The aim is to demonstrate a proof of concept, to determine whether the approach trialed in this project could be adopted as part of the regular local services.

In this project the programme does not impact disproportionately on wider vision services if the scheme is adopted.

References
2. Surrey and Sussex LEHN (2016). Hard To Reach And What To Do About It? Working paper