Sustainable service piloted for the homeless

The recent Steele review acknowledged that although NHS dental services were generally available, communication and publicity about these services could be much improved. Last month Chief Dental Officer for England, Dr Barry Cockcroft, launched an initiative at East London homeless charity the Whitechapel Mission to enable London's homeless to better access dental services.

A mobile dental unit serving the homeless has been set up as a pilot project in Tower Hamlets, which runs until May 2010. Homeless people can access it at the Whitechapel Mission, as well as nearby residential homeless unit, Booth House and Dellow House day centre.

Leaflet

As part of the pilot, Dr Cockcroft launched a newly-published leaflet: Free NHS Dental Services for Homeless People in London, which gives information on dental services for homeless people, as well as details about emergency dental services and tips on oral health.

The leaflets are being distributed at homeless organisations and through the Department of Health-funded existing mobile tuberculosis screening service, which reaches thousands of homeless people annually. The TB service has been on the road for three years, after a successful pilot.

The mobile dental service for homeless people is modelled on the TB unit. Its director, Stephen Trilvas said homeless people were more comfortable if services were taken to them, which could act like a bridge. He said: "NHS services are not geared up for people with challenging health needs. As we got better at working with outreach workers in the TB project, we started to discover that there were parallels for other groups including the homeless, people with drug and alcohol problems and those living in hostels.

"This pilot is a microcosm of improvements needed across the UK. It is not enough just to commission services for homeless people if they cannot find them. So taking services to them is the key to reducing inequalities.

"That's why we are working with existing services for homeless people to give information on where they can go for treatment.

Pro-active

"Tackling inequality means encouraging people to access services which are already there, which is a more pro-active way for them to get dental care."

Whitechapel Mission's director, Tony Miller said: "We work with chaotic people who are hard to pin down and are excluded. The TB mobile service saw 1,905 homeless people last year. The next chapter is the dental service, from which we are hoping for big things."

The Mission has set up an innovative programme of its own, by donating 500,000 fluoride-preloaded toothbrushes annually to homeless people, at a cost to the mission of 1p per person.

Mr Miller said: "We have kept homeless people who never had access to dental care before.

Extending relationships

Project development officer for the homeless, Rellie Bailey, who designed the oral health leaflet for the homeless, said: "Although most people have access to NHS dental services the DH has identified a need for helping hard-to-reach client groups including the homeless and those living in hostels.

"The aim for this project is to put a system in place to manage a clear pathway for homeless and vulnerable people to access dental care."

"The leaflet on oral health is specifically targeted at the hard-to-reach. It stresses the importance of oral health and signposts individuals to community dental services in London."

Ursula Bennett, head of dentistry at Tower Hamlets PCT, said: "Homeless people were now being reached who never had access to dental care before.

Dr Cyril Brazil treats homeless people two days a week at the community dental services for homeless people at Great Chapel Street medical centre, in central London.

Make a difference

He said: "It is very rewarding work. If I can go home and feel I have made some difference to help homeless people survive the day and not suffer from dental pain, then it has been worthwhile."

"The treatment won't change their world, it just means at least they will not have to suffer dental pain."

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Ursula Bennett, head of dentistry at Tower Hamlets PCT, said: "We have kept the promise not to preach, but to demonstrate through action."

The pilot mobile oral health programme is a step towards the Mission's goal to empower excluded people.

The pilot's impact will be evaluated by analysing the data of people receiving dental treatment at the community dental services, which is anticipated will provide information on the scale of oral health problems among London's homeless.