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.

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 Trivis 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 challenges.”

Mainstream services

“The oral health project is being piloted along the same pattern, of plugging people into mainstream services who hadn’t previously accessed them successfully.”

Dr Cockcroft commented: “The Steele review said dental services were available overall, but that communication about this was not good enough.

“We are trying to communicate the fact that there are dental services available for homeless people.

“Oral health is generally good in England, but there is a need to reduce inequality.”

“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 them information on where they can go for treatment.”

Professional

“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 each. This means homeless people who attend the centre can have a new toothbrush every day, for a cost to the mission of only £5.65 a year.

Dentist 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.”

Project development officer for the homeless, Rellet 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 extending relationships

She said: “The key to improving access is building networks of relationships. This pilot is an example of extending relationships with other services. We will all learn from working together”

She said experience showed that what worked was to offer dental check-ups to the homeless attending breakfast at the Mission, which could be followed up by treatment in the afternoon.

In 1876, the forerunner of Whitechapel Mission opened, serving more than 11,000 breakfasts to the homeless in its first year. The Mission took over in 1896 and now serves breakfast for up to 150 daily.

Mr Miller said: “We have kept to 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 it is anticipated will provide information on the scale of oral health problems amongst London’s homeless.