

Case study



Developing primary care mental health services in Northern Ireland

Causeway GP Federation

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About Jane

Jane Reynolds was one of the first OTs in Northern Ireland (NI) to develop a role for OT in primary care. Prior to taking this role she worked in a range of mental health settings and leadership roles.

A 10-year plan to reduce health inequalities and improve health care in NI, identified the need for GPs to widen their remit. Funds were made available to five GP federations to pilot multi-disciplinary intervention teams.

The Causeway GP Federation was successful in their bid to be part of the pilot. In January 2020, Jane was recruited to lead a newly formed team of mental health practitioners which included three OTs (Reynolds 2020).

Louise Connolly and Linda Hamill joined Jane in early 2020, just before the COVID pandemic took hold in the UK. They both worked in secondary care mental health and recognised that earlier intervention could have a significant impact on people with mental health needs.

They were excited to join primary care services. Between them, and their colleagues, they designed a new service, providing proactive and preventative mental health interventions. Causeway GP federation now employ 11 primary care mental health practitioners, from different professional backgrounds.

About the innovation

40% of people who access GP surgeries in NI present with some element of mental health distress (Naylor 2020).

The primary care mental health practitioner team provide short term assessment and intervention for those not requiring secondary mental health services. The team offer:

- psychoeducation to help people understand the impact of their mental health on their daily occupations
- self-help advice to help people develop routines that support their mental health
- anxiety, depression, and stress management to enable them to reengage with meaningful activities
- goal setting
- lifestyle advice such as support to sleep better.

They use a range of resources such as:

- websites
- specific workbooks relevant to mental health interventions in primary care
- lifestyle prescribing resource handouts
- questionnaires and worksheets
- evidence based podcasts
- patients are also directed or referred to local services such as counselling or activity-based groups provided by colleagues in the community and voluntary sector.

The OTs in the team bring their knowledge and skills around meaningful and productive activity.

They assess and work collaboratively with patients to find solutions and provide interventions.

For example, a patient presenting with low mood will often benefit from completing an activity diary and a behavioural activation approach to improve motivation and affect.

Their service extends from childhood to older age. Intervention is provided over four to six sessions with work to complete between sessions. Intervention was initially provided face to face but since the pandemic the team have developed a hybrid model of working.

Because of the diversity in the healthcare system in NI, the team have developed 16 care pathways for referrals to different secondary care teams in the local trust. These include the:

- Condition Management Service
- Adult Autism Service
- Adult Community Mental Health Teams
- Older People Mental Health and Dementia Services
- Crisis Management Mental Health Services
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Jane monitors population health through analysis of referrals which she details in a quarterly report. This is shared with the Department of Health, the federation executive committee and the multi-disciplinary project committee. She also uses this to guide the focus of their provision and the development of new expertise in the team.

The team use peer support and reflective sessions to ensure they build the skills needed. They have recognised learning needs related to children's mental health, alcohol use and forensics. They've reached out through their networks, learning from others to enhance their skills.

References

Naylor, C, Bell, A, Baird, B, Heller, A and Gilbert, H (2020) *Mental Health and Primary Care Networks - Understanding the Opportunities* The Kings Fund Centre for Mental Health

Reynolds J (2020) Occupational therapists get to work in Northern Ireland's GP surgeries during the Covid 19 pandemic Occupational Therapy News, August 28(8), p7.

Jane and her team report improvements in outcomes such as personal care, social skills, routines, sleep and eating habits.

Impact

In the last three months alone, the mental health practitioner team have received 3,081 referrals and provided 6,236 consultations. This averages three to five new referrals and five to six review appointments a day, totalling 56 contacts per week.

A patient satisfaction survey sent to 400 patients showed that 97% of patients were very satisfied or satisfied with input from the team. 70% of patients found the resources used were useful.

The adult community mental health teams locally report a 43% reduction in referral rate. New referrals to their secondary care teams are more appropriate now the primary care teams are in place.

The condition management program, a service for people with long term conditions, aimed at keeping people in work, also reports a positive increase in appropriate referral rates.

GP surgeries are keen to increase the number of sessions provided by the team, reporting reduced reliance on medication for people who benefit more from non-medical interventions.

Sandra (a person accessing the service) said 'They were helpful, friendly and approachable. I was listened to and understood.'

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