

Improving the health of people who present to ambulance services due to alcohol misuse

Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust used the NICE quality standard on alcohol dependence and harmful alcohol use to establish a region-wide alcohol referral pathway. This places the patient at the centre of the care pathway, ensuring they receive the support they need to tackle their harmful drinking.

“Someone in my state wouldn’t often seek help themselves or are often not in a state to do so. The input from the ambulance crew was invaluable for me and could be for others too.”

Alcohol referral pathway patient



A greater public health role for paramedics

Alcohol is one of the leading causes of accidents in the UK. Ambulance clinicians are too often called to pick up the pieces at incidents where someone has become ill or injured as a result of excessive alcohol consumption.

In the first quarter of 2013/14, the Yorkshire Ambulance Service (YAS) attended 10,178 calls where the use of alcohol was suspected. This equated to 5.9% of all calls and has associated costs including ambulance call out, A&E attendance and possible admission.

Many of these patients who misuse alcohol would benefit from further involvement, support and engagement with specialist services. There was an opportunity for ambulance clinicians to have a role in providing this additional support.

YAS created an alcohol referral pathway that promotes the ‘Make Every Contact Count’ approach - a nationwide initiative to encourage healthcare professionals to use every opportunity to help people stay healthy and reduce system-wide costs to the NHS.

Acting on a patient’s history

The alcohol referral pathway was initially established in Sheffield and Rotherham in October 2011. The pathway centres on two of the NICE alcohol quality standard statements around providing opportunistic screening, brief interventions and referral to specialist alcohol services.

YAS has a number of other referral pathways in place which are made through a central hub. Therefore, once agreed with the service provider, it was relatively easy to establish the pathway. A bespoke referral form and operating procedure was produced to collect all the agreed information which is then sent to the provider.

There were some initial concerns from the service providers regarding use of the CAGE screening tool for alcohol problems. However, the importance of using a uniform and simple assessment tool was explained and this led to an agreement to use the CAGE tool Yorkshire-wide.

Having the pathway in place allows ambulance clinicians to act on information gathered as part of the patient’s history. Prior to this pathway, the patient’s potential alcohol issues would not have been addressed other than via a possible referral from a GP or hospital.

Referral pathway well received

Results and evaluation from the initial roll out in Rotherham and Sheffield revealed that between April 2012 and October 2013 there were 120 patient referrals to alcohol services at an average of over 6 referrals a month. In the previous 7 months, there were 52 patient referrals with monthly fluctuations between 2 and 11.

The pathway was launched Yorkshire-wide in December 2014. In the first 28 days there had been 34 referrals, exceeding the expected one per day. Both clinicians and clinical hub found the referral a simple process.

As the alcohol pathway relies on the patient consenting to being referred, it demonstrates that ambulance clinicians are able to engage with patients at various stages of their alcohol misuse. Patients have also reported that they found their experience of the pathway very positive.

YAS believes that in order to successfully roll out the alcohol pathway, referral systems should be in place to handle the numbers and a central hub should be used. This has allowed YAS to effectively capture and handle data and ensures that the pathway is accessible to clinicians 24/7.