NICE National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

Injectable anti-obesity medications in specialist weight management services: supporting people with complex needs

Case studies

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Overview

Organisation: Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, Musgrove Park Hospital

Organisation type: NHS Foundation Trust

The introduction of anti-obesity medications

Liraglutide was recommended by NICE in December 2020 and became available for prescription through specialist weight management services. This service was the first in the UK to begin prescribing it in early 2021. The clinical team was committed to providing this treatment to as many eligible people as possible, but they identified the need for additional staffing to support and monitor people throughout their treatment journey. At the time, there was a shortage of dietitians, which further highlighted the challenge. NICE's guidelines emphasise the importance of ongoing monitoring to assess the medication's effects, as well as reinforcing behavioural advice and ensuring adherence through regular reviews.

The team was aware that NICE was expected to recommend additional anti-obesity medications such as semaglutide. Given the complexities of dose escalation, high prescription volumes, and the need for wrap around care, the team recognised the importance of seamless coordination. Additionally, dispensing from a hospital pharmacy serving a geographical area spanning over 4,000 km^2 posed unique logistical challenges. To meet these demands, they had to adapt their service model to ensure safe and effective prescribing of the medications.

The complex nature of patients

The need for additional staff was especially critical due to the complex nature of the people they served. Of around 900 referrals a year, many include people with neurodiversity, mental health problems, significant past trauma leading to post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), eating disorders, and more. For most of these people, bariatric surgery is not suitable. With the introduction of pharmacological treatments, the clinical team was cautious about prescribing these without having proper support in place. NICE's

guidelines highlight the importance of providing equitable access to services for individuals with learning disabilities or autism, emphasising person-centred care.

In Somerset West and Taunton, it is estimated that 1 in 7 people exhibit neurodiversity, which could equate to 14% of their referrals. In 2024, they saw 20 people (3%) with learning disabilities alone. Unfortunately, data was not available for referrals related to other neurodiverse conditions.

According to NHS Digital's 2024 experimental statistics on the health and care of people with learning disabilities:

- 37% of people with learning disability are classified as living with obesity. This is greater than those without learning disability (30.1%)
- the percentage of people who have a learning disability and an ADHD diagnosis has nearly doubled (from 5.5% in 2017/18 to 9.0% in 2023/24)
- the percentage of people who have a learning disability and an autism diagnosis has increased from 21.4% in 2017/18 to 33.3% in 2023/24
- the percentage of people who have a diagnosis of autism has increased from 0.5% in 2017/18 to 1.2% in 2023/24.

Genetic testing for obesity

NICE recommends setmelanotide for treating obesity in adults caused by the deficiency of certain genes (LEPR or POMC). The team noticed several people who had not previously undergone genetic testing. To investigate genetic causes of obesity, testing was arranged to allow for further personalisation of treatment and care as well as to identify potential eligibility for ongoing clinical trials.

Reviewing current services and implementation

Reviewing current services

A weight management nurse was recruited in November 2022, and they began by contacting people already having liraglutide. According to patient feedback, there was:

- poor communication with the department (busy lines, no call backs)
- no support with side effects
- poor communication from the pharmacy (no prescription issued or collected)
- a long time between appointments.

In March 2023, NICE recommended semaglutide 2.4 mg, which needed to be prescribed by NHS Specialist weight management services and alongside lifestyle and behavioural advice. While the specialist service was in operation, at this time they had no established clinical pathway for monitoring people on these medications.

Implementation

Based on patient feedback and the need to comply with the guidance, in 2023, the weight management nurse:

- established specialist clinics for initiation and follow up of people having injectable medications, providing education, support and monitoring through their treatment. This included:
  - seeking to restart people having liraglutide who were previously lost to follow up or discontinued treatment due to side effects
  - providing education to pharmacy staff and developing a template for pharmacies to email patients to collect their repeat medication (no calls or relying on answer machines)

  - designing specific computer-generated prescriptions to allow safety and audit
  - establishing a dedicated mailbox for patients to request prescriptions or wrap around care
  - developing handouts for managing side effects with some visual aids for people with neurodiversity
  - setting aside a dedicated phone line for people with neurodiversity or sensory deficit who have no support at home or require more regular contact
- established clinics for genetic testing for obesity
- to meet the high demand of prescriptions and to ensure efficiency of the service, completed the independent prescribing course in May 2024.

Outcomes and learning

Outcomes

Outcomes

Of all people having injectable anti-obesity medications, none have been lost to follow up. Of this, 17% had neurodiversity, complex needs and a genetic cause of obesity.

Learning disability: 12.5%.

Autism: 12.5%.

Dyslexia or illiteracy: 14%.

Complex PTSD and mental health problems: 18%.

Genetic cause of obesity (excluding people with genetic cause and neurodiversity): 18%.

Sensory deficit: 5%.

In 7 months, approximately 900 prescriptions were reviewed and issued. This equated to 8 weeks of a consultant's time based on a capacity of 24 hours a week.

Regarding genetic testing, out of the 58 samples sent, over 40 variants were detected. Setmelanotide was not eligible for these patients as the variants detected were not currently included in NICE's recommendations, but 9% were eligible for clinical trials with setmelanotide.

Learning

By establishing a dedicated clinical service, including a specialist weight management nurse, the service was able to respond to local need, establish clinical pathways for monitoring people on weight loss medications and reduce health inequalities in people with complex needs. As a result, they are set up to implement tirzepatide and future anti-obesity medications, despite previous concerns.

To continue delivering high-quality care, the service relies heavily on administrative support. Without this, they would struggle to provide the necessary care, particularly for people with complex needs.

They also established a system for genetic testing, allowing them to help expand scientific knowledge for future obesity treatments.

Supporting information

Quotes

"I would like to state unequivocally that without the support, care and gentle encouragement of the weight management nurse and the rest of the team, I would have self-sabotaged the medication protocol. I live alone and have mental health problems, so the professional human interactions are reassuring that I am ok, and the side effects are manageable. Moving to 6 month follow ups after the initial 3 months is fine as I know I can make contact if I'm worried. Medicine without care is incomplete and harms the patient. Thank you."

Simon (person with complex PTSD and mental health problems. Total weight loss: 40 kg [17%] in 6 months).

"I would like to say thank you for helping my son lose weight. What a change from last year! Back then, he could barely manage the steps in the house and was refusing to walk. I had just seen a video of him running! He has to hold his trousers up but can still run! His "college" has mentioned a huge improvement in his engagement and has become more polite. His improved health, and improvement in attitude are the best gift this holiday! Thank you!"

Mother of a person with rare genetic disorder, severe learning disability, and behaviour problems. Total weight loss in 1 year: 24 kg (17%).

"We are working alongside a physiotherapist regarding exercise to build his lower leg muscles due to many years of dragging his swollen legs and stopping to use a rollator. He can now walk upright and has become less dependent on it, favouring the walking stick instead. He is now awake, alert and involved with activities during the day and hoping to go away on holiday. The weight loss has already had positive impact not just on his physical but mental wellbeing. He will be starting to swim again soon."

Support worker for a person with learning disability. Total weight loss: 44 kg (5% 2021/23 and further 18% 2023/24).

"The judgment I feel from other clinicians in a health care setting has previously prevented

me from engaging. Fear of shame and the worry of being judged for my weight from a clinical point of view is a real barrier when needing to access care. Support whilst taking Wegovy helps keep me engaged. The reassurance and knowledge from clinical staff are invaluable when taking this drug and administering lifestyle changes."

Katie (person with complex PTSD and mental health challenges. Total weight loss: 17 kg [9%] in 4 months).

"I've been overweight since I was a child and always different to my siblings, but I didn't know why. I spent my childhood hungry and ashamed. The genetic testing has changed so many things for me mentally. I'm not angry at me anymore for not being able to control myself or for letting myself down again. I'm kinder to myself, I have bigger aspirations and I'm far more confident in myself. I've been supported by the weight management nurse. I have regular follow ups, and I don't feel like I'm being judged on my "results". Thank you, you've changed my life!"

Yasmine (results showed genetic cause for obesity. Total weight loss on the medication: 11 kg [10%] in 6 months).

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