

Community Pharmacy: at the heart of public health

Raising awareness: Cancer

Cancer is one of the leading causes of death across all ages and earlier diagnosis can save lives. Late diagnosis has a huge impact on England's poor cancer outcomes. Changing adults' behaviour could avoid a substantial proportion of cancers (1).

It is estimated that a substantial proportion of cancers could be avoided, mainly through a combination of stopping smoking, improving diet and increasing physical activity. Skin cancer is among the top five cancers in 15-24 year olds and is linked to the use of sunbeds (2).

Community pharmacy can provide an additional point of access for promotion of cancer awareness and increase public choice over where they can access information and undertake interventions.

In Westminster, early detection of breast cancer was enabled by the promotion of the NHS Breast Screening Programme through pharmacies to increase uptake and coverage. Not only was awareness raised, but appointments were booked through pharmacies for eligible women and confirmed by email, text or phone call (4).

The four PCTs in Essex covered by the Essex Cancer Network looked at both raising awareness of and the early detection of skin and bowel cancer. Pharmacists and pharmacy counter staff were trained to discuss the red flag symptoms of these cancers, particularly for those patients that may be hiding symptoms through the purchase of over the counter medicines, and to initiate discussions and so raise cancer awareness. Over 8,800 leaflets were distributed initiating over 4,600 conversations in relation to skin and bowel cancer, so raising the awareness of both conditions. Six percent of these interactions resulted in the pharmacist advising the person to see their GP because one or more symptoms had been identified that may be indicative of cancer. When asked, over 93% of the members of the public said they had a greater awareness of the symptoms of cancer following the conversation. The service was very well received by patients with 92% comfortable in discussing issues relating to cancer with pharmacy staff (3).

References

- 1) Healthy Lives, Healthy People - our strategy for public health in England. Department of Health (2010)
- 2) Our Health and wellbeing today. Department of Health (2010)
- 3) Newman J, Pandya A, Wood N. *Promoting Cancer Awareness and Early Detection within Community Pharmacies* (2010)
- 4) Information from the PSNC Community Pharmacy Services database www.psnc.org.uk

