

Spotting the signs

More patients affected by domestic violence and abuse are getting the help they need because clinicians are receiving training developed by Bristol researchers

Overview

Researchers at the School of Social and Community Medicine developed training and support that enables GPs to identify patients affected by domestic violence and abuse and refer them to specialist services to get the help they need. This not only benefits the patients, it also saves NHS resources.



“I had been experiencing verbal, emotional and financial abuse from my husband for over 26 years....The doctor referred me to someone who could help... I don't need to go to the doctor's as much now and have cut down on the tablets I take for depression and sleeplessness.”

– A patient at an IRIS practice.

A woman experiencing domestic violence and abuse will often go to her local general practice with a variety of symptoms that are not obviously connected to violence such as anxiety, depression and stress. But because most GPs have had little or no training in how to identify patients affected by domestic violence, they often fail to recognise patients experiencing abuse and are uncertain about further care after disclosure.

A training and support programme developed by Professor Gene Feder and his colleagues at the School of Social and Community Medicine at the University of Bristol is changing this and has led to up to six times more women receiving the help they need.

Called Identification and Referral to Improve Safety (IRIS), the programme has now been commissioned by local authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups and is running in 33 areas of England and Wales with training delivered to more

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than 450 practices. The current annual rate of referral of victims of domestic violence and abuse from IRIS practices in England and Wales to specialist domestic violence agencies is over 1,500 per year, with trial data indicating that at least 1,250 of these would not have taken place without the IRIS programme.

“Domestic violence and abuse is a major public health problem with serious health consequences and enormous costs to the NHS. IRIS provides a unique opportunity for primary care clinicians and their patients to talk about the issue,” said Prof Feder. “The way in which a primary care clinician approaches the subject with a patient can make an immense difference to that person’s life and the lives of affected children. Ultimately the whole programme is to the benefit of patients, practices and practice teams.”

One patient sums up the experiences of many women after consulting her GP who had been trained using the IRIS programme: “I had been experiencing verbal, emotional and financial abuse from my husband for over 26 years. I felt sad, low and unable to cope. The doctor referred me to someone who could help... I don’t need to go to the doctor’s as much now and have cut down on the tablets I take for depression and sleeplessness. I have slowly got my freedom back and am so happy to be making my own decisions and planning my own way in life. This is not just for me, it’s for my children and women like me out there. I feel empowered. I feel proud of me.”

As well as its impact on individual victims of domestic violence and abuse, the IRIS programme is having an economic impact on the NHS. With the current number of IRIS practices, the annual societal cost saving is estimated to be greater than £38m annually. This estimate is based upon the results of the cost-effectiveness model developed from the trial outcomes.

“Domestic violence and abuse has a devastating public health, clinical and economic impact on women,” said Prof Feder. “We know that referral to specialist domestic violence agencies result in a reduction of recurrence of domestic violence, improved quality of life and probably improved mental health of these women. We are proud of the impact our research has had on survivors of domestic violence and abuse and we hope this impact will be ongoing. We are now investigating the possibility of setting up a social enterprise company that will continue the work and enable the delivery of training to many more GPs.”

Key facts:

- The underpinning research was funded by the Health Foundation
- In 2007, research was led by Professor Gene Feder at the University of Bristol and involved colleagues from Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL) as well as voluntary and charitable sector such as nia in Hackney and Next Link in Bristol.
- By 2010, clinicians in general practices were being trained on how to identify patients who may be affected by domestic violence and abuse and how to refer them on for more help
- The intervention was tested using a cluster randomised controlled trial
- It was found that the IRIS training and support programme dramatically increased the number of women getting help from domestic violence services
- The implementation of the IRIS programme has been found to be cost-effective as judged by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) criteria, reducing NHS costs and generating societal cost savings
- IRIS is now used in 33 areas of England and Wales, including more than 450 GP practices. A version of IRIS is also running in five areas of Scotland
- For more information, see <http://www.irisdomesticviolence.org.uk/iris/>

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