Community nurses can encourage men to look after their health

With reference to the JCN’s editorial on the ‘ticking public health time bomb’ and the role of nurses in tackling unhealthy lifestyles (www.jcn.co.uk/journal/04-2014), our research investigated the effect of professional football clubs in delivering health improvement in a traditionally hard-to-reach but huge population — namely, men (Pringle et al, 2014).

Premier League Health (PLH) was a national programme of men’s health improvement delivered in 16 professional football clubs. Men attended weekly physical activity and health education sessions delivered by health trainers employed by the football clubs.

Importantly, the lifestyles reported by the men confirmed that they were living exemplars of the time bombs discussed in the above-mentioned JCN editorial — many of their lifestyles featured the toxic cocktail of bad diet, alcohol and smoking that blight so many men’s lives, even as early as their late 20s (European Commission, 2011).

In PLH, some of the health trainers were nurses with a background in health promotion and behaviour change. In interviews, men who had participated in the programme regularly identified the importance of health professionals, especially practice nurses, in encouraging them to take the first steps toward engagement (Pringle et al, 2014). This encouragement was vital to these men as many were so poorly connected to existing health services that they would rarely come across facilities designed to meet their needs, let alone be offered new ones. (White et al, 2012). One-third of our recruits had never attended their GP and over half had never used health advice services (Pringle et al, 2014).

While some men found out about PLH through health trainers, others learned about it from friends/family, who themselves had discovered PLH through community/health practitioners (Robertson et al, 2013).

The men often had substantial apprehensions about the programme — even the idea of playing sport conjured up notions that were genuinely frightening to men who had not been active in a long time. However, the health trainers managed to recruit around 4,000 men into the PLH evaluation — to the health trainers, ‘hard-to-reach’ only meant ‘not-yet-reached’.

Participants also described how the positive ‘tone’ of the practical sessions was so important to them. Health trainers delivered many of the sessions and in some cases they were supplemented by activities delivered by nurse specialists. We were at pains to emphasise the importance of positive emotional experiences when encouraging attendance and health trainers quickly grasped the importance of every single attendance and took the opportunity to praise the men simply for turning up. Others realised that allowing potential recruits to come along ‘just to look’ was important for providing reassurance. In one club, onlookers were encouraged to join in ‘for a few minutes’ — these tester experiences were important for building the confidence that many men lacked. Still others recognised the importance of word-of-mouth and ended their sessions with the words, ‘Tell your mates!’ (Pringle et al, 2014).

In our research, health professionals, including nurses, provided vital advice and guidance on lifestyle issues, along with information and encouragement to take up the opportunities for health improvement provided through football clubs. They provided an essential ‘human touch’ that was meaningful to the men we recruited who were often missing that experience. As such, nurses were crucial in diffusing the ‘ticking public health time bomb’ that these men had primed through their lifestyles. JCN