Community nurses are championing the cause of carers

When we talk about patient-centred care, moving ‘care closer to home’ and evidenced-based care, there is one group of people that are often, unwittingly, left out of the conversation — the carers.

NHS England, NHS Improving Quality and the Royal College of GPs are in the process of addressing the question: when it comes to making a commitment to carers, are we making a difference?

At the QNI, the question is already being addressed — we recently held two Champion Days in Birmingham and London as part of our Carers Project to further draw out the evidence. We were overwhelmed by the number and range of community nurses that chose to attend and become recognised as a ‘Nurse champion for carers’.

As well as hearing from Dame Philippa Russell, chair of the Standing Commission on Carers, on the challenges for community nurses of supporting carers as well as patients, they had the privilege of listening to the real-life experiences of two young carers who provided pause for thought, as well as inspiration to those in attendance.

One of the young carers, Sophie, told the gathered audience that some carers don’t even identify themselves as such — it simply becomes the norm. She reminded people that carers look after people out of love, not for pity or gratification — that is why getting people to identify themselves as carers is not easy and communication is essential. Sophie added that being a carer has a stigma attached to it, and that the teenage years are difficult enough without having another label applied.

Listening to such a young person discuss the difficult emotions and conflicts around being a carer was inspiring, a feeling reinforced by Lauren, another young carer who admitted struggling with her role. A number of nurses said they felt her honesty was very brave, but also heart-wrenching.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY NURSES

It is this level of honesty and preparedness to share experiences that has helped community nurses to enter a new domain — one where they previously did not feel confident or sometimes even wanted. Due to the roles they have had to fulfil in recent years, community nurses have often compromised their person-centred practice for outcome-focused results. But this has begun to change recently, with a new focus on the role of carers as NHS policy seeks to move services out of hospitals and closer to people’s homes.

A survey of nurses carried out by the QNI earlier this year as part of its Supporting Carers project (www.qni.org.uk) found that 95% of respondents saw it as their responsibility to help meet the health and wellbeing needs of carers. When respondents were asked how they do this, their answers (in order of frequency) demonstrated a high level of awareness of carers’ needs:

- Listening and support
- Referral to care support groups/carer support workers
- Signpost for information
- Flu vaccination
- Regular health checks
- Carers’ health assessment
- Referral to other professionals/practice lead for carers
- Providing posters, leaflets, carers’ packs, self-referral system.

As well as acknowledging that community nurses already recognise the needs of carers and are doing excellent work in this area, the QNI’s Champion Days also actively encouraged them to make a ‘pledge’ to better support carers and go that extra mile to encourage their colleagues to do the same. Over 200 pledges were made over the two days, and ranged from community nurses saying they would do more to understand carers’ needs, to student nurses pledging to ask why carers are not covered in their university curriculum.

In answer to the question: ‘Are we making a difference to carers?’ it’s a firm ‘yes’ from district, general practice and school nurses across the country. Judging by the evidence we have gathered so far at the QNI, it’s clear that the commitment they’ve made is going to be a lasting one.  

Jennie Whitford is carers’ project manager at the QNI.

For more information about the QNI Carers Project, please visit the website at: http://qni.org.uk/for_nurses/supporting_carers/about_the_carers_project