The role of health visitors in caring for older people

Hannah Britton, health visitor, Active Ageing Service, with Sirona care and health CIC

An ageing population and increase in people living with long-term conditions have heightened the practical and financial pressures on health services. Preventative public health projects are now viewed as crucial to protecting health, reducing the financial and personal costs of illness, and consequently protecting health services.

THE ACTIVE AGEING SERVICE

In Bath, North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire, Sirona care & health CIC has developed a public health community service for older people. The Active Ageing Service is run by health visitors (specialist community public health nurses) who are assisted by support workers.

The service offers home visits to residents aged 80–84 in addition to targeted services for people above this age range who have been identified by healthcare professionals. The service aims to support older people to remain healthy and active within their communities through preventative advice, support and care, and partnership working to identify and modify risks.

The service differs from other health visiting/nursing services for older people where clients are only seen when they have been referred. Through routinely contacting all 80–84-year-olds we have an opportunity to work with people who do not have routine professional contact, enabling early identification of risks before they develop into problems.

THE ROLE

Clients are identified through partnership working with general practices and offered an initial home visit. Those who are acutely unwell, terminally ill, managed by a community matron or specialist team, or who live in nursing or residential homes are not contacted by the service.

‘The aim is to support older people to remain well and active within their communities through preventative advice’

Two service levels are available based on need — universal screening and a universal plus service — this is similar to the progressive model used within children’s health visiting, which aims to reduce health inequalities.

Universal screening includes a holistic assessment, exploring topics including social support, stimulation, mobility and falls, medications management, daily activities, mood, and memory.

For those with additional needs that have been highlighted through their history or universal screening, the universal plus service is provided by a health visitor, enabling a more in-depth assessment with additional screening for issues such as memory, depression and falls. All clients are offered an annual review; however, the service also provides short term support for issues including low mood, bereavement and social isolation.

Examples of the service’s work include identifying unreported falls, recognising people who are struggling to manage with memory problems, identifying and modifying environmental risk factors, highlighting poor nutritional status, and recognising loneliness. Through partnership working with clients and families, steps can then be taken to protect clients’ wellbeing.

Our professional relationships with statutory and voluntary agencies ranging from falls clinics, clinicians with access to telecare/memory technology, to the police, fire service, dieticians and social clubs allow us to refer people to appropriate services.

The service also seeks to recognise gaps in community provision, for instance one of our health visitors recently discovered that there were no exercise groups for older people in her area. Through partnership working with a local gym she started an exercise group for older people, benefitting their physical, social and emotional health.

We value opportunities to work preventatively with older people and a recent service-user audit has shown that the service is highly valued by its clients. We aim to keep on evaluating the service, so that we can continue to target the right clients. While reactive health services support us to recover from illness, we also need to value the preventative, public health services that work to keep us well.
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