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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Health psychology: Behaviour change for health and well-being in adults and children in Northern Ireland

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Key policy recommendations:

Health Psychologists could help to:

1. Achieve public health targets.
2. Develop and evaluate health care services.
3. Identify evidence based behaviour change techniques to inform public health interventions and promote health.
4. Increase the uptake of already existing services and programmes.
5. Identify low cost ways to enhance behaviour change.
6. To contribute to the training of other health professionals

Introduction:

Reducing health inequalities and promoting well-being is a main focus for Government health policies in Northern Ireland. Many of the chronic health conditions that are prevalent in our society today, such as obesity, coronary heart disease and diabetes, all have one thing in common, they can be linked to poor lifestyle choices such as smoking, consumption of unhealthy foods and being sedentary. Therefore undertaking certain behaviours can have a big impact on health and well-being (Abraham et al., 2008), some behaviours are health promoting (physical activity) and others are detrimental to health (smoking). There are a number of studies to suggest that engagement with such health compromising behaviours are linked to increased morbidity and mortality (Khaw et al., 2008; Abraham et al., 2008). Such poor health behaviours are widely distributed in our society (Kelly, 2006). This suggests that many of the risk factors for chronic health conditions are preventable, and that health care delivery and Public Health campaigns need to focus on behaviour change to promote health. Specific groups should be targeted by such campaigns. In order to achieve this there is a need to understand more fully what facilitates or prevents this such behaviours and how we can manipulate beliefs and attitudes to bring about behaviour change.

A number of health psychology researchers are working in the area of behaviour change within Northern Ireland. The aim of this seminar is to provide an overview of how health psychology theories are being used to design more effective interventions to improve health and well-being in different groups and across a range of health related behaviours. Directly linking behaviour change to policies and guidelines for improving health.

What do Health Psychologists do?

Health Psychologists are experts in applying psychological theory and methods to prevent illness, promote health and improve health care delivery. They use in-depth and evidence based research to improve health outcomes and maximise health gains by determining which factors facilitate or compromise health. By using applied theoretical frameworks Health Psychologists can design, implement and evaluate behavioural change interventions that can support Public Health objectives nationally and regionally within clinical and community settings.

Why do we need Health Psychologists?

Health Psychologists can improve health outcomes by:

- Enhancing adherence to public health screening programmes and helping to achieve health targets.
- Improving the uptake of medical treatment and adherence to medical treatment regimes.
- Designing, implementing and evaluating programmes to target behaviours that are a risk to health such as smoking cessation campaigns, or physical activity promotion, thus impacting on public health outcomes.
- Identifying appropriate evidence based behaviour change techniques to develop new public health interventions or enhance the uptake of already existing ones.
- Training other health care professionals in techniques to promote better self-management of chronic conditions.
- Reducing the number of patients presenting to GPs by increasing public awareness of how to self-manage illness and symptoms.

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- Improving strategic planning and service development to improve health check programmes, improve quality of life and reduce health risks.
- Developing and evaluating local services using evidence-based research methods.
- Establishing cost effective interventions for behaviour change.

Behaviour Change Interventions

There is a strong economic case for investing in health promotion to reduce health care costs (McDaid, Sassi & Merkur, 2015). The Department of Health in their White Paper: Choosing Health (Department of Health, 2004) also recognises the importance of behavioural change interventions for improving Public Health. The National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (2007) have developed evidence based guidelines on how to design, implement and evaluate Behaviour Change Interventions. These guidelines are the direct result of work in this area carried out by health psychologists. There have been a number of recommendations on how the guidelines should be used and the training required to achieve best practice (Abrahams, Kelly, West & Michie, 2009).

Behaviour Change Interventions are defined as “coordinated sets of activities designed to change specified behaviour patterns” (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011). Behaviour Change Interventions have been used to promote better uptake of health care services, to promote healthier lifestyles and guide best practice in Public Health. It is worth noting that some theories of behaviour change such as The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) have been endorsed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the UK Medical Research Council as an evidence-based way of predicting health related behaviour and a framework for designing behaviour change interventions (Michie et al., 2005). Health Psychologists can apply such theories and research to a number of health related behaviours, both at a community level and clinical setting in order to improve and address health inequalities and poor health outcomes.

Evidence of improved health outcomes following psychological interventions

Research evidence, NICE guidance, government directives and National Service Frameworks provide strong arguments for the benefits of providing a health psychology service in many clinical areas. These include:

- Cancer (NHS Cancer plan, 2000; NICE Improving Supportive and Palliative Care for Adults with Cancer, 2004)
- Chronic Pain Management (Clinical Standards Advisory Group, 1994)
- Cardiology (NSF Coronary Heart Disease, 2000)
- Diabetes (NSF for Diabetes, 2003)
- Renal Medicine (NSF for Renal Services, 2004; 2005)
- Stroke (NSF for Older People, 2001)
- Chronic fatigue syndrome (MRC, Report of the CFS/ME Working Group, 2002)
- Obesity (NICE Guidelines, 2006)

Training in Health Psychology in Northern Ireland

Currently, we are the only devolved nation who do not have established posts for Health Psychologists in the Health Trusts. To use NHS Scotland as an example, they note a number of benefits from

employing Health Psychologists, including their important role in helping Health Boards to meet the HEAT targets and the local delivery plans for health. They have contributed to a range of programmes that have had a direct impact on health and well-being in Scotland, such as promoting breast feeding, drug/alcohol services, sexual health, bowel cancer screening and hand health hygiene. The main benefits are the implementation of best practice into the health service in Scotland, linking up with academics and behaviour change research which feeds directly into practice and policy and providing a sustainable input into health policies.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. Including health psychologists and those trained in the use of health psychology in health care teams.
2. Providing support for the training of health psychologists in NI
3. Ensuring that the basic knowledge and evidence from health psychology is incorporated in the training of health professionals
4. Drawing on health psychology expertise in planning and designing health care

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