MEMBER SHOWCASE

Case study

Care pathways for those with mental ill health or substance misuse issues

Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust

The challenge

Staff at Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust were receiving high numbers of 999 calls from those experiencing a mental health crisis. In addition, ambulance crews often identify mental illness or substance misuse issues in those they see. These patients may never have sought support for their problems, and so ambulance clinicians may represent their only route to treatment.

In the past, staff had few referral choices in either of these situations. 999 responders had little option but to send an ambulance, and if an ambulance was dispatched it often resulted in a patient ending up at hospital – even if there wasn’t necessarily a medical need for the person to be there. This increased pressure on ambulances and A&E, meaning they were less able to support those for whom their care was most appropriate.

What was done

Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust has introduced a number of initiatives to bolster care for those with mental illness or substance misuse issues. These include:

Mental health nurses within the 999 control room: These clinicians offer specialist advice and support to ambulance staff caring for patients with mental ill health or substance misuse issues. They help triage patients, identifying what support is needed and how urgently. The setup was piloted in December 2014, and implemented formally from April 2015. Funding was secured from the local clinical commissioning group, and the system was quickly set up through the recruitment of agency mental health nurses and the development of appropriate governance.

Direct referral to a mental health team: If a full assessment shows a patient has no medical need to go to hospital but a clear need for mental health support, ambulance staff can refer individuals directly to a specialist mental health team.
Emergency clinicians are able to have a direct conversation with a member of the team 24/7 and together they can ensure the patient gets the most appropriate care.

Direct referral to alcohol misuse service: An ambulance call out can be an opportunity for a person to agree something needs to change with their use of alcohol. Yorkshire Ambulance staff can now refer patients directly to the local alcohol misuse provider service if a patient accepts an offer of support – again, referrals can be made 24/7. This is not an alternative to taking a patient to hospital, but used in addition to any normal care that would be provided.

The results
Since the introduction of specialist nurses to the 999 control room, the number of patients in a mental health crisis who have needed to be taken to hospital has decreased. Staff report they are better able to meet the needs of people displaying mental health issues, and are able to ensure ambulances are only dispatched when that is the best care option for them. This increases the availability of ambulance resources for other patients.

Evaluation and development
Continuing evaluation is exploring the qualitative and quantitative benefits of introducing mental health specialists to the 999 control room. Research so far highlights the need for time, effort and funding in implementing such a scheme. In the context of a fast-paced and intense working environment, staff expressed both enthusiasm and concern at the need to develop the intervention on a daily basis.

The trust is also working with Public Health England Yorkshire and Humber on ways to formally evaluate referrals to the alcohol misuse service.

“Someone in my state wouldn’t often seek help themselves, or are often not in a state to do so. The input from the crew was invaluable for me and could be for others too.”

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