



Fundamentals of Sustainable Health Systems

Cases & Faces of Sustainable Healthcare

Hotspot: Alternative Care Delivery

Case Study: Social Prescribing at St Austell Healthcare, Cornwall, UK

Setting: St Austell Healthcare, Cornwall, UK

- St Austell is a major town situated in mid-Cornwall with a population of just over 36,000
- The town has a high incidence of socioeconomic deprivation and an above average percentage of residents living with limiting long-term illnesses (23% vs 17.6%).
- After a recent merger of four separate practices, St Austell Healthcare is the largest primary healthcare provider in Cornwall with 32,000 patients annually
- Ratio of patients to physicians: 4,500:1
- Organizational emphasis on addressing the wider determinants of poor health

Nature-based therapies have been applied for centuries, but their contemporary application is known as “green prescribing” or “GRx,” which is understood as “an emerging, innovative strategy that is designed to improve physical and mental health and wellbeing through exposure to, and often multisensorial interaction with[,] natural environments.” (Robinson, 2019) Many argue it is the latter, rather than exposure alone, that imparts therapeutic and/or enabling benefits. These emerge through engagement with other humans and non-humans in “natural” spaces through relational activities such as gardening, bird watching, conservation volunteering, green exercise, and wilderness arts and crafts.

Green prescribing is used to both prevent and treat a variety of physical and mental health issues. As a treatment, it is generally widely accepted as having stress-relieving and mood-enhancing benefits, though much of the evidence for this comes from experimental studies as randomized controlled trials, the gold-standard for establishing clinical evidence, are difficult to undertake in non-clinical settings. In terms of prevention, green prescribing promotes a healthy lifestyle and “supports the maintenance and development of health-promoting infrastructure.”

Green prescribing is often used as part of a broader social prescribing strategy, wherein GPs, nurses, and other healthcare professionals refer patients to a range of local, non-clinical services that are perceived to have a therapeutic benefit. From a sustainability perspective, social prescribing (including GRx) has two primary benefits. First, social prescribing’s potential to avert the development of various health problems can eliminate the environmental impacts that would have been associated with a given individual’s health care. Second, insofar as it may reduce (or even completely eliminate) an individual’s need for pharmaceuticals, it helps to mitigate the environmental impacts associated with drugs, which are the single largest source of carbon emissions in the health system.

Cornwall’s St Austell Healthcare aims to capture the preventive and therapeutic benefits of connecting people with each other and their environment through a social prescribing program devised in collaboration with the Eden Project, a nearby complex featuring plant biomes and green spaces. St Austell staff began to explore the benefits of social prescribing when the merger of several practices left them with a patient to physician ratio of 4,500:1, leaving little time for in-depth discussions with patients about their overall health and well-being. Additionally, health care providers noticed that a number of individuals were presenting with social problems such as loneliness, inactivity, debt, and poor nutrition—issues that fell outside their area of expertise. To learn more about social prescribing, GP Stuart Smith made a visit to Bromley by Bow Centre, a community centre in east London widely regarded as a model of social prescribing; upon his return, St Austell initiated its own social prescribing pilot program in 2016.

The first step in the pilot project was the creation of a Social Prescribing Navigator role at St Austell. The role was designed to provide a link for patients between their GP and community activities. Second, St Austell collaborated with the nearby Eden Project to develop nature-based community activities to which it could refer patients. This endeavor, called Eden on Prescription, was funded with a grant from the Big Lottery (the largest funder of community activity in the UK) and the European Social Fund. The Eden Project used its years-long experience creating nature-based programs to devise the first social prescribing activity: a weekly horticultural therapy program held in an 867 sqm garden created expressly for this purpose. The program offered people with anxiety and depression an opportunity to develop horticultural skills, and a concomitant sense of value and self-worth.

Over time, more activities have been added to the program, which is now a Cornwall-wide program called “Nature’s Way” funded by the Department of Health and Cornwall Council; along with the ongoing horticultural therapy program, these include weekly walking groups for people with COPD, diabetes, and cardiac conditions, and a walk and talk lunch club for older people. Hundreds of individuals have participated in these activities over the past few years, and although St Austell’s social prescribing work now includes a range of other activities, it attributes its best results to its work with the Eden Project. In a 2018 survey, it collected the following results from patients participating in Eden’s activities:

Horticulture Therapy Program:

- 100% said they feel more confident and they have a stronger feeling of self-worth
- 100% reported a restorative experience at the garden
- 70% were now either working, in education, or volunteering somewhere
- 65% reported feeling less isolated

Diabetes Walking Group:

Of the 27 patients who had been taking parts in walks for at least six months at the time of survey:

- 70% reduced their HbA1C (blood sugar), with 4 individuals now in the non-diabetic range
- 85% reduced their BMI
- 7 had reduced their medication, with 3 having stopped entirely

Eden Walk-and-Talk Lunch Club:

- 90% said they felt more interested in other people and were taking an interest in new things
- 75% reported feeling more cheerful
- 70% said they were feeling better about themselves and closer to others.

In addition to these patient benefits, St Austell Healthcare has found that social prescribing has reduced pressure on appointments, with a 40% reduction in GP appointment utilization at 6 months (>1000 saved appointments each year). Healthcare providers also feel that the social prescribing program has enabled them to provide patients with more appropriate care, as they are able to avoid 'medicalizing' needs which are best addressed through social approaches.

Sources

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The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a large, black, serif font. A small red maple leaf is positioned above the letter 'a'.