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Cold Attitudes - How we undermine our health

Pensioners in poor health should be eligible for help with fuel bills and energy savings measures, irrespective of whether or not they receive benefits, according to a report based on research among older people in the North East.

The report, by Attend Rights to Warmth, also recommends that GPs' contracts should include incentives to identify older people for whom cold is a health risk and take steps to help keep them warm.

The report, *Changing attitudes towards the cold*, is based on a survey among more than 250 older people in County Durham. It was funded with a grant from Eaga Partnership Charitable Trust.

The survey found that older people were ignorant about the potential impact on their health of being cold; they consequently believe that heating the home is something they can economise on without serious consequences. These attitudes must be changed, both to improve older people's quality of life and to increase the effectiveness and take-up of programmes to help people make energy savings through energy efficiency measures. A way of achieving this is through the trusting relationships they have with their GPs.

'We have to recast the way we think about this problem. The report shows that older people will respond to seeking help with fuel bills when it is understood how cold is undermining their health, well being and independence'

Says Mervyn Kohler Age Concern & Help the Aged

Survey findings. The survey found that there was a significant problem of older people using adequate heat:

- 6% were worried about fuel bills
- 24% had felt cold 'all' or 'most' of the time the previous winter
- 56% used energy to balance household budget
- 35% turned heating down when it was cold outside
- 20% were cold because of draughts.

77% agreed that the cold makes their symptoms worse; however many older people were unaware of the longer term health damage that can follow exposure to cold. And there was little awareness that it can take an older person longer to realise that they are cold.

The report links this to other research that suggests as many as 400,000 admissions to hospital through A&E may be related to cold homes, representing a significant drain on NHS resources.

‘The Report shows how the 25000 excess winter deaths we register each year is really just the tip of the problem. The cost to the health and social services through wholly unnecessary emergency admission and continuing dependency on care is significant. The cost in personal misery is greater.’

Says Professor Andrew Gray, Visiting Professorial Fellow, North East Public Health Observatory and Vice Chair of NHS County Durham.

In the light of these risks and costs, the report recommends that eligibility for social tariffs and energy efficiency grants be expanded beyond ‘passport’ benefits to include long term health conditions and recent hospital discharges.

Role of GPs and charities

The survey showed that older people believed that they were doing all they could to keep warm, and few expressed interest in receiving advice about energy efficiency. In addition, most would not feel comfortable in accepting advice from sources such as energy suppliers – health professionals such as GPs and charities such as Age Concern received the most favourable reaction.

The report therefore recommends that GPs should consider whether people’s health conditions are being exacerbated by living in cold conditions and refer them to appropriate support.

The report suggests that using the health system in this way to raise energy awareness and the uptake of assistance to support people has the potential to be an effective way of reaching those who are most vulnerable and also cost effective in reducing demand on the NHS.

‘There is a key role for voluntary community based organisations to champion this message and continue to keep an eye out for vulnerable people at real risk of undermining their health through being cold’

Says David Wood, Chief Executive of Attend

Tariffs and bills - managing independence

Tariffs are needed that enable people to pay energy costs evenly through the year, without requiring them to pay by direct debit or standing order. Attention needs to be given to identifying and supporting those who are both vulnerable through low income, poor heating facilities, homes with low energy efficiency and people with poor health to maintain heating at the recommended levels.

NOTE TO EDITORS: Attend, formerly the National Association of Hospital and Community Friends, is a community-based health charity. Attend undertook the project with support from BrandEnergy Research and Age Concern Durham County. It was carried out in April 2008, after significant increases in energy prices early in the year, but before the larger increases announced in July and August.

Attend 'Rights to Warmth' has been undertaking a social marketing campaign in Durham with the Co Durham Rights to Warmth Partnership to alert older people to the damage to their health that can be caused by living in cold conditions.

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The Eaga Partnership Charitable Trust is a grant-giving trust that currently supports projects and research in two main areas: the relief of fuel poverty and the promotion of energy efficiency; and vulnerable consumers – multiple needs and preferences. For further information on Eaga Partnership Charitable Trust, contact:
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