Where GPs go, politicians will follow

The UK government's green paper on welfare reform supports putting employment advisers in GP practices to help people come off incapacity benefit. **Zosia Kmietowicz** looks at a practice which has had such an adviser for more than four years

It will come as no surprise to most doctors that a key proposal in the UK government's green paper on welfare reform, announced last month, started life in general practice some years ago. Doctors have long known that unemployment can undermine general as well as mental health and that as it continues problems tend to accrue and prospects dwindle. But most have had little to offer their patients other than the address of the local job centre. That is until four years ago when a group of GPs in north London saw an opportunity to do things differently. And now John Hutton, the work and pensions secretary, is following suit.

Roy Macgregor and his partners at the James Wigg Practice in Kentish Town, north London, were already offering their patients a chance to see an adviser from the Citizen's Advice Bureau when they hit on the idea of establishing an employment adviser on their premises. They approached Tomorrow's People, a charity established in 1984 to help the long term unemployed, and worked out a plan.

Since 2001, in partnership with Tomorrow's People, an employment adviser has been seeing patients from the practice one day a week. The charity pays the salary of the adviser, and the practice provides an office. Although doctors can refer patients to the service, they soon found that 70% of those making appointments were self referrals.

"The fact that we had this resource on our premises meant that people could go and make an appointment when the time was right for them," said Dr Macgregor. "They prefer to visit an independent expert here on site without fears of the stigma that can be attached to attending a job centre or a more formal ser-

vice that they may find threatening." The adviser sees both people on incapacity benefit and people who are long term unemployed.

Dr Roy Macgregor: "The sessions are not just about job advice. The advisers are more akin to life counsellors"

Dr Macgregor believes that part of the success of the scheme is down to the fact that advisers use doctors' consultation rooms and are seen by patients as having an equal status to doctors. Another is their approach to the work. "The sessions are not just about job advice. The advisers are more akin to life counsellors, who help people see things in a different perspective and raise their self esteem," he said. Advisers also help with motivation, moving on to retraining if necessary, support with updating CVs, interview techniques, and updating skills.

Nearly 200 patients have seen an adviser, and, of those who have completed the programme, 87% are now working or back in education or training. On average, 82% are still in work a year on.

The practice estimates that

patients who see an employment adviser have on average five fewer consultations a year as a result. Patients who have taken up offers of advice are prescribed significantly fewer antidepressants.

Funding for the scheme comes from the government's single regeneration budget, as part of a larger project being run by Tomorrow's People to help the long term unemployed in London. More than 80 surgeries, hospitals, and health centres in the UK now have an employment adviser on site, and interest in the scheme is booming. Funding is raised separately for each project and comes from various sources, including the

use local employment offices because they think that making enquiries about returning to work signals that they are fit to do so and will put their benefit at risk.

Since the scheme at the James Wigg Practice began to report its success, the doctors have been hosts to an endless stream of government observers. Representatives from the treasury, the Department of Health, the Department of Work and Pensions, and the Number 10 Policy Unit have all paid visits. The fact that the green paper on welfare reform mentions plans to pilot employment advisers in GP surgeries is not a surprise, says Dr Macgregor. He would like to see job advisers in every GP practice, but has reservations about linking employment advice to benefits. One of the strengths of the Tomorrow's People scheme is the independence of the advisers, believes Dr Macgregor.

"Doctors surgeries cannot become subsidiaries of the [Department for Work and Pensions]," he said. "If people are going to be paid to go to see an employment counsellor and have to go at a stated time, they may not be ready to go to work. What has worked for us is that people are self motivated and they go to see an adviser when they feel it is right for them."

There are no details yet as to how employment advice schemes led by the government might operate. Many organisations have welcomed the proposed welfare reforms and acknowledge that the NHS has a part to play in helping some of the 2.7 million people in the UK currently on incapacity benefit back to work. But some also have expressed concern about the use of compulsion and sanctions.

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health warned, "[The government] should particularly avoid any situation where people's benefits could depend on their take-up of healthcare services." A number of agencies have also said that to get people off benefit and back to work employers need to take a more positive attitude to people who have gaps in employment and mental health problems. □

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The green paper, *A New Deal for Welfare: Empowering People to Work*, is available at www.dwp.gov.uk.