



Care for Offenders: Continuity of Access (COCOA)

Continuity of care

Continuity of care is about giving people a coordinated and smooth progression of care through the health care system, before prison, while in prison and after release.

There is considerable ill health among prisoners, particularly substance misuse and mental health problems. Poor health along with unemployment, homelessness and social isolation are linked to re-offending. A lack of continuity of care could also mean that attempts to improve health and reduce re-offending are less effective.

Continuity involves different professionals and services working together to create integrated services, having access to information about a person's previous health care and creating an ongoing relationship with the patient or service user.

Continuity is valued by health professionals and patients alike. Patients and service users like being able to see the same trusted practitioner. Effective communication between providers enhances care and reduces repeated assessments. Each of these aspects poses considerable challenges for both health and criminal justice agencies.

The project

The COCOA project aims to influence policy and practice by examining how access to, and continuity of health care for offenders can improve health and reduce re-offending. This project will answer the following questions:

1. What is the current level of access and continuity of healthcare for offenders?

2. What are the essential elements of continuity?
3. Which models of service delivery are likely to be effective?

It will also help to resolve practical questions about how continuity can be achieved. For example:

- Should prison health care resources be diverted towards anticipating needs and developing care packages for when people are released?
- If people can be registered with a GP as they leave prison, should their health care records be sent direct to the GP, or would ex-prisoners prefer to engage with a GP without the added stigma of their prison record?
- Should prison health care develop primary care mental health teams or integrate psychological approaches into the re-housing, employment and family elements of resettlement?

The research will include:

- A survey of health care continuity in police custody suites, courts, probation teams and prison health.
- Two in-depth case studies of health care for those in contact with criminal justice agencies in Watford and Plymouth.
- Structured interviews with 300 people who are under probation, or entering or leaving prison.
- Several follow up interviews with these people, for up to 12 months.

The project is funded by the Service Delivery and Organisation Programme (SDO) and is jointly hosted by the Peninsula Medical School and Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. It will complete in 2011.

Research team

Dr Richard Byng, Principal Investigator, Peninsula Medical School is a GP with experience of mental health service development, evaluation and policy.

Dr Cath Weyer Brown, Project Co-ordinator, Peninsula Medical School trained in the history of psychiatry and qualitative research techniques. She has worked on a variety of research projects on the experiences of socially marginalised groups.

Dr Chiara Samele, Lead Investigator for the London site, is the head of research at Sainsbury Centre. Her interests span carers, offenders and physical health care for people with mental health problems.

Claire Warrington, Research Assistant, Sainsbury Centre has an MSc in Forensic Psychology and has experience of interviewing offenders.

If you would like to be updated on the progress of the project please email cocoa@pms.ac.uk or call 01752 764230 to get our quarterly newsletter.



On the Outside

Continuity of care for people leaving prison

Price £10

Continuity of care is vital in all areas of health care. For released prisoners with mental health problems it is especially important to help them get their lives back on track on the outside.

We found that prisoners on short sentences often find it difficult to get access to health care and housing support in prison. Prison transfers and early release may disrupt care and resettlement plans.

Half of the prisoners interviewed did not have permanent accommodation arranged which made it harder for them to keep in touch with services. Professionals said ex-prisoners often lost contact with services because they were not sufficiently tailored to their needs.

On the Outside calls for the creation of a key co-ordinator role to help released prisoners

navigate through the large number of agencies they need to work with to get support for their mental health, substance misuse, housing and employment needs.

This report will be of interest to everyone involved in the provision and commissioning of health care and resettlement services for prisoners.

On the Outside is available to download from our website at www.scmh.org.uk, or you can order a paper copy on the site or by calling 020 7827 8305.

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