

GPS AND CANCER CARE: IT'S NOT ALL DIAGNOSIS AND DEATH

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Cancer doesn't always come very high on GPs' agenda. There is a tendency to think their work is confined to diagnosis and end of life care, with secondary care picking up everything in between.

The low priority given to many aspects of cancer in the quality and outcomes framework and delivery of the contract can serve to heighten that impression.

The reality is, of course, very different. Increasingly cancer survivors are being cared for in the community which means GPs have a critical role to play in managing and co-ordinating their care.

That is one of the prime reasons why last year Macmillan Cancer Support teamed up with specialist training body GP Update Limited to put on four one-day cancer courses across the UK for a total of 300 participating GPs.

The courses were free because this was far from a captive audience. But organisers were confident that once the GPs signed up the course itself would convince them of its worth. Even so the cost per participant to Macmillan for the initial free pilot course amounted to less than the cost of one GP locum for half a day.

As one of the presenters of the course, Macmillan Lead GP Adviser Rosie Loftus was able to gauge its impact first hand. 'There was a huge enthusiasm in the room to be involved in cancer care and to get it right,' she says.

'Looking after people with a cancer diagnosis through to the end of life has a big impact in many ways, not least on the clinicians themselves. No one wants to get a diagnosis wrong and we all want to ensure that someone's death is as good as possible. There's only one chance to get that right.'

The evaluation by GP Update underlines this positive reaction. Most participants found the course very relevant, said it had increased their understanding of cancer issues and felt it would improve their ability to commission appropriate cancer services. They did not think this sort of training was available elsewhere.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

What is the GP Cancer Update course?

A new one-day cancer course run in collaboration with Macmillan Cancer Support, aimed at helping GPs in their understanding of cancer and providing easy access to the latest evidence, guidelines and best practice.

Who is it for?

GP Update's courses are run by GPs for GPs. The style is informal and the day includes practical examples, case studies and group work. The courses have a reputation for delivering relevant, practical and hands-on update training for GPs.

What does the Cancer Update course cover?

The course covers cancer prevention, screening, diagnosis and treatment as well as palliative care and cancer survivorship. There are clinical updates on a wide range of topics including breast cancer, colorectal cancer, medication side-effects and cancer genetics. All participants receive a cancer update handbook which they can take home with them.

How can GPs get access to the course?

Macmillan Cancer Support and GP Update ran a series of pilot courses across the UK in 2012. More courses are planned for 2013. Macmillan are making a contribution to the cost with delegates paying the balance. You can register your interest in attending by contacting us at: mail@gp-update.co.uk or phoning **0118 960 7077**.

It is also apparent from a number of in-depth interviews we conducted with participants that many are already starting to change their practice as a result of what they learnt on the course.

South east London GP Liz Cameron said the course had prompted her to send a woman for screening for possible ovarian cancer when she might not have done so otherwise. Meanwhile Herts locum Susan Purbrick was given the confidence to offer one of her patients a detailed description of the pros and cons of prostate cancer screening. 'I probably would have said similar things beforehand but I felt more confident in saying it as a result of the course.'

Many said they were likely to refer more patients as a result of the course. 'I will probably have a higher suspicion and lower threshold for referrals because the course identified risk factors that I wasn't fully aware of before,' noted one Scottish GP.

Another thought she would be on higher alert over possible cases of colorectal cancer because 'there is so much to lose in not referring early in that particular cancer'.

Just as importantly, some GPs were beginning to recognise their wider role in cancer care. 'As a GP you tend to feel that once a diagnosis is made you don't have that much involvement after that,' said Rachel Boyce, a GP in Bracknell. 'But I think the thing that struck me most from this course was how practically I could improve care to patients who already have cancer – maybe not immediately but further down the line.'

Yorkshire GP Angela Wright suggested many GPs could feel deskilled when called upon to help with treatment-related issues. 'The course was very good because it looked at the bit we don't get very well trained on – after diagnosis and before palliative care. That's been a real training gap.'

A number said the course had made them more aware of the support that Macmillan could offer them in the form of leaflets, resources and training. Most said their practices would be making more use of these in the future. One has already applied to be a course trainer.

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of loneliness and isolation that so many people experience make it even harder.

No one should face cancer alone. And with your support no one will.

Together, we are all Macmillan Cancer Support.

For cancer support every step of the way, call us free on **0808 808 00 00** (Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm) or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

For further details about our work with GPs, contact us at macmillan_primary_care@macmillan.org.uk

For Susan Purbrick the course had opened her eyes not only to what Macmillan has to offer but also the wide-ranging roles of their staff. 'There's a bit of a tendency to think Macmillan nurses are just end of life care which they're obviously not,' she said. 'I didn't know about the training courses they run either or about people being Macmillan GPs. In fact, if I had known earlier in my career it might have been something that attracted me.'

But, according to Rosie, the ripples from courses such as these can reach well beyond the actual participants. 'It's not just about you and your patients, you can change the whole practice and its protocols and that's where the impact can be multiplied many times over.'

Merton CCG Clinical Lead Carrie Chill, for example, has publicised Macmillan's risk assessment tools for cancer to her clinical commissioning group. 'At least one practice has taken up the offer to pilot the tools and there may be others further down the line.'

Meanwhile, East Cheshire GP Katie Guillem is now working with colleagues to bring their Do Not Attempt Resuscitation documentation up to date and ensure any decisions are communicated to all relevant staff groups.

Some of the changes may be slow or even imperceptible but Rosie has no doubt the courses are proving their worth, which is why Macmillan and GP Update are continuing their partnership. 'People might think that in terms of numbers and time this is small but the eventual impact could be huge.'

Nor should the immediate impact on participants be under-estimated. As Katie notes: 'Sometimes you're so busy with the day-to-day work that you don't have time to stop and put into practice all the great ideas about what you might like to do. This course prompts you to do that. It makes you enthusiastic again about doing the job.'

