Social marketing – better vision for better health

Professor Nizar K Hirji and Rebecca Marsden introduce the concept of social marketing and shows how it may encourage improved health.

Visual impairment (when the level of vision is below that which the individual requires for their everyday tasks) has a very significant impact on the quality of life. It is also strongly associated with falls, hip fractures, depression and with a higher risk of suicide. Ageing, obesity, alcohol consumption and smoking, the demographic and lifestyle characteristics identified in the population of Dudley are key risk factors in one or more of the following eye conditions that cause visual impairment:

- Refractive errors
- Cataract
- Age-related macular disease
- Glaucoma
- Diabetic retinopathy.

Older people from deprived areas and poorer backgrounds often put off accessing eye care services and often present with advanced disease and visual impairment. The consequence of not detecting and managing these conditions is permanent visual impairment and low vision.

Seventeen per cent of visual impairment in the over-65s and 30 per cent in over 75s was found to be due to uncorrected refractive errors. Seventy-three per cent of the over-65s in one study had not visited an optometrist within the last 12 months despite their visual impairment. Improving sight test uptake would result in reduction of visual impairment among Dudley’s population due to uncorrected refractive errors, undetected cataracts, AMD, glaucoma, diabetes and vascular diseases and promote better health.

Attending for a sight test is dependent on individual motivation, not just failing vision. Thus it was necessary to understand why sight tests paid for by the NHS in the older population may not be taken up, and what potential solutions could be employed to remove barriers.

Social marketing, a term coined by Kotler and Zaltman, is the ‘systematic application of marketing, alongside other concepts and techniques to achieve specific behavioural goals for a social or public good’. It uses marketing techniques of the commercial sector to influence behavioural change in targeted areas of society. However, there are differences. In social marketing the products tend to be more complex, demand is more varied, target groups are more challenging to reach, consumer involvement is more intense and competition is more subtle and varied.

The white paper Choosing Health set out a commitment to improving the nation’s health by assisting people to make healthier choices. Along with the earlier Wanless Report, it recognised that encouraging positive health behaviour (and related behaviour change) can be complex and challenging, and to achieve this requires sustained and coordinated action across sectors and at all levels. Social marketing was specifically...
highlights the importance of social marketing, and how it can be used to promote activities that would traditionally be considered part of growing old. Dudley NHS’s Communications team began a social marketing project to understand what motivates older patients to attend or otherwise, for sight tests with a view to supporting a communications strategy that began in October 2008 to increase uptake of the test.

**Qualitative research**

- One-to-one interviews were held with representatives from the local authority, Age Concern and the commissioner for older people at NHS Dudley.
- A focus group was held with 14 borough residents at the Older Peoples Forum.
- Small semi-structured interviews of between one and four participants were held at four locations across the borough (Age Concern day centres, Friendship Groups, WRVS Luncheon Clubs, and Sheltered Accommodation).

A total of 38 people participated in these interviews.

**Actionable outcomes**

Throughout the research, the most common word used by participants was ‘precious’, both when describing eye sight and their quality of life. This word was used on 26 separate occasions by the focus groups and during the semi-structured interviews in addition to:

- Biggest motivation to attend for a sight test was the risk of not being able to enjoy life
- Tacit acceptance that sight failure as part of growing old
- People in Dudley trust independent opticians as opposed to chains
- Poor understanding of the range of conditions that could be discovered from the test
- The cost of spectacles was a big factor in people not attending
- Personalised communication messages as opposed to generic advertising was preferred.

Participants were reluctant to be called old and many 60-70 year-olds stated they were enjoying the best years of their lives. However, there was a consensus among the groups that failing eye sight was a sign of getting old and that they accepted and expected this to happen.

When asked what activities would be affected by failing sight and what patients feared missing out on, the following were offered:

- Driving
- Family events
- Reading
- Watching TV
- Hobbies
- Exercise.

As a result of this insight Dudley NHS engaged the Dudley public with eye health messages, using press coverage, and promotional material that capitalised on the ‘precious’ dimension of activities that would be affected with failing eyesight (Figures 1a and 1b).

There were 11.278 million NHS sight test claims in England processed 12 months to March 31 2009,13 This is an increase of 231,000 (2.1 per cent) on the previous year. In Dudley, for a similar period, a greater than the national increase in NHS sight tests was noted, suggesting a successful raising of the awareness of the importance and benefits of sight tests and improved access.

**References**

1 www.medscape.com/viewarticle/514448
7 Dudley Strategic Needs Analysis – Part 2 – Health Risks.
11 Securing good health for the whole population, Feb 2004, Department of Health.
13 Nizar Hirji is visiting professor, University of Manchester & City University, London, and optometric adviser, Black Country Cluster. Rebecca Marsden, at the time of writing, was communications and social marketing manager, NHS Dudley.

**Examples of the promotional material issued by Dudley NHS**