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DISEASE-RELATED MALNUTRITION: TAKING THE CHALLENGE TO PARLIAMENT

Today, malnutrition affects at least three million people in the UK. One in three people in care homes, one in 10 visiting their GP and one in four people admitted to hospital are malnourished and the number of malnourished people is increasing.



These sobering figures were shared with parliamentarians at the BSNA breakfast roundtable last month by BSNA Director General, Declan O'Brien, in his introduction to the event. This was followed by a thoughtful discussion of the need for a greater focus on disease-related malnutrition across both health and social care settings.

The BSNA event, sponsored by David Tredinnick MP, brought together parliamentarians and concerned health-care professionals to discuss the challenges faced by patients at risk of malnutrition and how the NHS can shape greater support for the future.

FOOD FOR SPECIAL MEDICAL PURPOSES

Also speaking at the event was Anne Holdoway, a dietitian from BAPEN, who pointed to the media focus on hospital food and people not wanting to eat it. For many, it is their illness that prevents them from eating, eg, patients may have difficulty swallowing, or have a reduced appetite. "This is where the food for special medical purposes, properly administered by a team who has the knowledge as to how to use it, translates into saving lives," she said.

Foods for special medical purposes (FSMPs) are a vital tool in managing disease-related malnutrition as they are designed to meet the nutritional or dietary needs of people who are temporarily

or permanently unable to get enough nutrition from normal foods. However, it was also made clear in the discussion that FSMPs are not a solution in themselves, as the lack of understanding of disease-related malnutrition and the importance of effective nutritional support throughout the care pathway is a major issue among medical professionals.

Anne said that it was a mistake for medical professionals to see malnutrition as, "just a small vitamin and mineral deficiency... it is actually quite profound – these patients, week after week, suffer from poor appetite and, without the right products and the right expertise, they continue to suffer from malnutrition, and as a consequence of that, the cost of healthcare and social care increase."

Yet, the direct costs of the medical foods themselves is stopping GPs from prescribing them. Suzanne Ford, dietitian advisor to the charity NSPKU, who also spoke at the event, said many Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) dismiss medical foods for their costs without examining why they are essential. A recent survey by NSPKU showed that more than 10% of the PKU population attending clinics in the UK are having prescription problems, with half of the patients finding the GPs to be actively blocking access to these products. Two thirds of the cases involved children and over half were going on for over a year. "So, our patients in these cases are facing

Left to Right: Anne Holdoway, Declan O' Brien (chair), David Treddinick MP, Eleanor Smith MP.
Credit: Paul Heartfield



a failure in the duty of care to them in preventing the best outcome, which is to safeguard their brain growth and development,” Suzanne said.

THE COST OF MALNUTRITION

The cost of malnutrition is high. Nearly £20bn is spent by health and care services to treat it each year. It costs over £5000 more to treat someone who is malnourished than well-nourished and it affects all parts of the country, regardless of relative wealth.

Anne Holdoway commented that we have the solutions, “but we need to raise the profile of the importance of nutrition and embed it into all of our pathways. If we look at the priorities of the 10-year plan – diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, cancer – all of those areas should have nutrition as an immutable part of care.”

Ex-Health Secretary, Lord Lansley, agreed that nutrition must be integrated into the preventative structure, especially when it comes to caring for the vulnerable and aging population. Eleanor Smith MP, who is a former nurse, acknowledged the vital role dietitians should play within such a preventative structure. With just over 3000 registered dietitians working within the NHS, attendees at the BSNA event were clear that greater investment should be made to increase numbers and to ensure that both nutrition and hydration is a central part of care and support provided to people who are at potential risk of malnutrition.

THE NHS LONG TERM PLAN

While the NHS Long Term Plan does make reference to equipping the NHS workforce to talk about nutrition, it is focused on the challenge

of reducing obesity levels in the UK. The Plan contains a commitment to ensure nutrition has a greater place in professional education training and also commits to upgrade NHS support to ‘all care home residents who would benefit’ by 2023/24, with the Enhanced Health in Care Homes (EHCH) Vanguard model to be rolled out across the whole country over the coming decade. As part of this, individuals will be supported to have good oral health and to stay well hydrated and well-nourished and will be supported by therapists and other professionals in rehabilitating when they have been unwell.

The promised NHS workforce implementation plan will go some way to help determine if this ambitious NHS plan is feasible. The proposals will see an additional 20,000 posts created as part of a wider ‘local primary care network’, including physios and pharmacists. However, no mention is made of the role dietitians can play in managing and preventing conditions such as diabetes, and in helping to manage disease-related malnutrition.

The roundtable also noted the lack of a senior accountable officer for nutrition and hydration at NHS England or at government department level. Such a person should address the wide range of factors leading to the rise in disease-related malnutrition and tackle poor nutrition across the population with better coordinated and resourced care and support given to health and social care.

This call to action was supported by roundtable attendees and BSNA will be building on their enthusiasm to ensure nutrition is a priority, as the NHS implements its Long Term Plan.



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