

Creating community value

How one GPN used technology to bring social prescribing directly to her patients



Social prescribing can alleviate many of the problems that can lead to more conventional health issues down the line

Advanced Nurse Practitioner and Queen's Nurse Helen O'Connell has been caring for her community in Haworth, West Yorkshire for almost 10 years.

But just before the pandemic hit, Ms O'Connell — who is based at Haworth Medical Practice — recognised there was something missing in that care and felt compelled to do something about it.

She developed Treacle, a social prescribing directory website now also an app - that helps people find the support they need in the place where they live. A 'one stop shop' for help and advice, this simple, yet powerful resource has already generated over £1 million of social value according to a recently commissioned impact assessment report.

Treacle gives details of all the organisations in Ms O'Connell's community of Haworth and Keighley that might help with such issues as mental health, debt, bereavement and loneliness.

'As a nurse in a GP practice, many of the people I see have health problems brought on by social problems. I could see the 'whole picture' with these patients.

'But it was a source of massive frustration that a patient would be struggling with a particular issue, such as debt, and while I would know there were organisations out there that could help, there was no easily accessible way of either myself or my patients finding them,' recalls Ms O'Connell.

The practice's social prescribers were over-subscribed with long waiting lists. What was needed, she believed, was a way to use the information social prescribers

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have access to, so patients could get support while they were waiting.

Her community is rich with local services, from mother and baby groups to walking groups, but Ms O'Connell couldn't keep track of them all, while many were not being used to their full extent.

But it was one particular patient who made Ms O'Connell realise that she needed to come up with a solution to address the lack of information about local support services. Sitting in her consulting room that day, observing the signs and symptoms, it became apparent that her patient could not afford to buy enough food and was suffering from hunger - 'and neither one of us knew where to find a food bank'.

Ms O'Connell decided to set up a food bank in her village. She was surprised to find that the people who needed the services the most, had no idea they were there. She realised some of the sickest



people in her community would not consider visiting the GP surgery to ask for help. And it became clear that the idea of 'health' could no longer be confined to the GP practice, but needed to be taken into the heart of her community.

Armed with pen and paper, she sat at her dining room table one evening and wrote down her thoughts about what would help make life easier for her community. She decided what was needed was a website.

Using a 'little pocket of money for health improvement' that had been designated to the medical practice, she enlisted the services of a website designer. She then researched which local and national organisations would be helpful to feature on the site, which involved 'loads of searching the internet, looking at social media groups and also signs outside churches advertising community meetings'.

Her website, Treacle.me, has been designed with seven sections, including: 'My Money', which details support and help for those dealing with money difficulties and debt; and 'My Mind' which is about mental health in all its forms including information about bereavement and mindfulness. There is also a special section on 'Make Friends' which deals with loneliness and gives details on how to join local community groups.

Treacle.me was launched - appropriately on the NHS's 72nd birthday in July 2020 - and quickly become a much-valued resource for local health and care professionals. 'They loved it. And in the days and weeks that followed the launch, I'd frequently hear that doctors and nurses were talking to patients about Treacle,' she says.

While initially created for patients and health professionals, as news of Treacle spread, she learned that schools and social workers were also finding it helpful 'as they had the same problems accessing details of organisations offering support and advice'.

Ms O'Connell continued to spread the message about Treacle, advertising its details in the local community magazine, and even on COVID vaccination leaflets.

Treacle expanded to cover the whole of Haworth, Keighley, and Skipton. Bradford and Craven District Care Trust commissioned the site to cover a wider area, and has been using it since April, and in September 2022, Treacle went 'live'

via Bolsover Council in Derbyshire.

As Treacle's influence has increased, so has Ms O'Connell's workload. She has been forced to reduce her nursing hours to devote more time to the 'mammoth work' involved in running the site and has also recruited an administration assistant. 'Treacle has become a real business - a trademark registered, community interest company - and a commissioned service that reaches out to many people,' she says. 'It's really taking on a life of its own, and appealing to sectors other than healthcare, such as local government, education and social care.'

The benefits of Treacle are far reaching. It means patients can be directed to an easy-to-use source of information without needing a face-to-face visit. And instead of seeing a GP or nurse, and then being on a waiting list to see a social prescriber, patients can easily find the information they need to help with problems such as debt, depression or loneliness, explains Ms O'Connell.

She says open access to the services on Treacle.me encourages engagement and forges links between social prescribing services and the community at large. Clinicians working in general practice can keep track of what is going on in the community and be able to direct patients there quickly. And as it also exposes gaps in provision, she hopes that in the future it will help to inform commissioning.

Feedback about the scheme has also highlighted its value, with reviews posted not only by health professionals, but also social workers and teachers. But the most valuable reviews of all to Ms O'Connell are from people saying how Treacle helped them deal with issues such as money worries or depression. One local BBC report on Treacle highlighted how the site had allowed one individual to help turn their life around - from feeling suicidal to accessing the help they needed and then go on to train to be a counsellor.

'The feedback I get is the best bit about my Treacle work. Just recently when I was giving a presentation about the site, health and care professionals were telling me how it's made their working lives so much easier, which is great.

'Information on that site has made such a difference. There's so many local groups out there that I didn't know about before Treacle, like the service that offers gentle tattoos to cover up self-harm scars. It's great that this site gives these valuable organisations a platform and more of a

voice to raise awareness about the great work they do.'

Developing Treacle has not been without its challenges. There was the initial financial challenge of building the website, and the need to find a web builder who she could work with from her local community, rather than a big agency. She also has to find the time to develop Treacle in between working as an ANP, and family life. 'What began as a hobby has taken over my life the past two years - it's taken my heart and soul to make it happen,' she says. 'Last Christmas my husband and children even gave me a neon Treacle sign. They know that as well as being a nurse, Treacle is who I am now.'

She has channelled her 'passion' for general practice nursing and for being a patient advocate to help drive her website forward. 'Persistence and determination' have helped her along the way, such as when she's searching for information about niche organisations or 'battling through bureaucracy and red tape'.

Looking ahead, she believes 'everywhere should have a Treacle site... I want more people to benefit from it. And my reasoning always goes back to that patient who was hungry and didn't know where to turn.'

She also encourages any nurses with ideas that they think will positively affect patient care, to overcome their doubts and concerns and to 'make that idea happen'. 'Don't feel you're not good enough. As a profession I think nurses - myself included - suffer from 'imposter syndrome'. But we are the people who know healthcare at the coal face, who are also passionate, inspired and caring.'

And when facing obstacles, she advises: 'Don't be told it can't be done. Don't wait. If I'd waited and listened to some people, Treacle might never have happened. Say 'yes' to every opportunity. And if you've got a good idea, crack on with it. It could make all the difference to your community.' **IN**

For more information visit: <https://www.treacle.me>

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Further reading

The Queen's Nursing Institute. Community Nursing Covid-19 innovation/best practice. Case Study. Treacle - a Social Prescribing Resource Website for the Community. <https://www.qni.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Treacle-a-Social-Prescribing-Resource-Website-for-the-Community.pdf#main>