

Progress in Practice

Health Activists in Slough

Slough PCT has benefited from a project that is working to raise awareness and help tackle the causes of heart disease in the large South Asian population in Slough. The project provides education and support by training members of the community to run "healthy heart" workshops.

Summary

The Health Activist Scheme aims to raise awareness about heart health and risk factors in the local population in Slough where levels of heart disease are high. The project delivers training to local people and professionals through Thames Valley University Vocational Training Centre Tutors in conjunction with Slough PCT staff, so that they can take the information to others in the community through running their own 'healthy heart' workshops.

The initiative began in 1999 and is funded by the Department of Health Coronary Heart Disease Health Improvement Reward Scheme.

At present around 30 Health Activists are qualified from within the local community, and from other organisations such as Age Concern, day centres, interpreters and neighbourhood wardens, and a further 21 professionals have received heart awareness seminars. Their training covers health promotion and heart disease - the risk factors and prevention, and has resulted in opportunities for promotion and jobs for Health Activists.

Nearly 100 sessions have been run since the start of the project, reaching over 1,500 local people. The sessions are evaluated on the basis of participant knowledge gained, behaviours changed and enjoyment, and have been very successful.

Health Activists are undergoing continuous training on other health concern issues such as diabetes, blood pressure, immunisation and food in schools. Further funding has been secured to develop Health Activists to support children and young people, older people, people with learning disabilities, mental health problems, cancer and diabetes, and people in midlife.



Health Activists have helped over 1,500 local people in Slough to access information on how to keep their hearts healthy.

Comments from sessions:

"I feel like a kid again, playing ball in the park!"

"I learnt how to cook curry differently."

"I will walk to relieve stress."

"I didn't realise there was so much salt in processed food."

"My son doesn't have McDonald's everyday now!"

Links and organisations involved: East Berkshire College www.eastberks.ac.uk; Thames Valley University www.tvu.ac.uk; Slough Borough Council www.slough.gov.uk; Open College Network www.nocn.org.uk; Slough Primary Care Trust <http://www.berkshire.nhs.uk/slough/>

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Shah-Bano Razvi

Shah-Bano works at Slough PCT and has been trained as a Health Activist. She worked extensively with Parvaaz, a voluntary group supporting women carers and relatives of disabled people.

Ten to fifteen people regularly attended the Parvaaz meetings where 'healthy heart' workshops were held. Topics of discussion have included:

- heart disease and risk factors,
- healthy eating, including portion sizes and food groups,
- weight management, and
- physical activity

These are considered the factors people are most able to control and discussions were often lively.

The group also took regular walks led by Shah-Bano and took part in swimming sessions. Several women have continued swimming regularly, resulting in the local pool offering a 'women-only' session in several activities.

"The women are really interested in learning about looking after their heart. They enjoy learning new recipes, going on walks and swimming. They seem much healthier, happier and more confident!"

Shah-Bano Razvi, Slough Health Activists

Strategic learning

- Health information given by people from the community means it is accessible and delivered in a form the community can understand. As a result the message is more likely to be received and acted on, and enables health messages to reach traditionally hard to access communities
- It is not enough to give people information about keeping healthy; it must be possible for them to act on this information, which means making healthy food choices available locally, and making exercising locally safe. This requires strong partnerships with other local organisations such as the police, local retailers and local authorities.



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