PRESS RELEASE

International research conference highlights the health threat of loneliness

Minister for Care Services, Paul Burstow, launches an online toolkit for local health organisations and councils to address loneliness in older age.

An international research conference is being held today which highlights that loneliness should be considered a major health issue. The conference, titled What Do We Know About Loneliness? will investigate the research that brings to light huge numbers of older people affected by loneliness in the UK:

- 8 to 10% who are intensely lonely
- 20% of the older population who are mildly lonely

It will also be the first UK event to bring together worldwide experts who have found that loneliness can lead to cardiovascular disease, hypertension, cognitive decline and poor mental health.

At this conference, held by the Campaign to End Loneliness in collaboration with Age UK Oxfordshire, Paul Burstow MP, Minister for Care Services, will launch a new digital toolkit for health and wellbeing boards as part of the solution to loneliness in older age.

Care Services Minister Paul Burstow said:

"Too many people in our society, particularly older people, are cut-off and isolated. We need to do more as a society to recognise those at risk of loneliness and isolation and help them to stay connected.

Loneliness can have a significant impact on people's health. Yet, unlike risks such as alcohol and obesity, it is still out of sight."
Relationships can help keep us well, and we can all play a part in tackling loneliness. That is why we have funded work on a toolkit for Health and Wellbeing Boards to support local councils and the NHS to take action to address the issue of loneliness in their area."

This toolkit urges local health organisations and councils to make tackling loneliness an equivalent public health priority to smoking cessation and reducing obesity. It helps to identify those at risk of loneliness, gives advice on how to tackle the growing problem and has been created by the Campaign to End Loneliness and funded by the Department of Health.

The loneliness and isolation toolkit for health and wellbeing boards will enable boards to:

- identify those at risk of loneliness
- prioritise the hardest to reach
- involve older people in their priority-setting
- take action to tackle this public health problem.

Loneliness in older age is increasingly being recognised by councils and commissioners across the country as an urgent issue in their communities.

Dr Shikha Pitalia, a GP from St Helens, Merseyside said

“Loneliness is a distressing consequence and a poignant reflection on today’s lifestyles. Patients of all ages, but particularly the elderly, face the far-reaching corollary of the powerful impact loneliness has on their health and wellbeing. GPs regularly observe the adverse effects loneliness has on the control of many long-term conditions. Far too often patients end up on multiple medications or in hospital as emergency admissions because their isolation makes it difficult for them to cope with their illness. Depression and lack of physical activity are significant contributing factors to these unacceptable outcomes. Health and wellbeing boards in partnership with emerging CCGs should embrace the unique opportunity to innovate and co-design pathways which successfully address these very important issues related to loneliness.”

Ends
Notes to editors

About the conference – “What do we know about loneliness?”

At this international research conference, highlighting the health threat of loneliness, Minister for Care Services, Paul Burstow MP, will be launching an online toolkit for health and wellbeing boards to address loneliness in older age.

Speakers

Monday 9 July

1415 - Professor Christina Victor, Brunel University, UK.

1455 - Professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Department of Psychology, Brigham-Young University, USA.

1615 - Professors Vanessa Burholt, Professor of Innovative Ageing, Swansea University and Tom Scharf, Professor of Social Gerontology and Director of the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Tuesday 10 July

0815 - Professor Mima Cattan, Public Health (Knowledge Translation), Northumbria University.

1030 - Professor Ann Bowling, Faculty of Health Sciences, Southampton University

1050 - Professor Jenny de Jong Gierveld, Department of Sociology and Social Gerontology, VU University Amsterdam and Honorary Fellow, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI)

1145 - Paul Burstow MP, Minister of State for Care Services, Department of Health

1445 - Professor John T Cacioppo, Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor and Director, Centre for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, University of Chicago, U.S.A.

The conference is being organised by Age UK Oxfordshire in partnership with the Campaign to End Loneliness. It is funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Independent Age and Oxfordshire County Council. The venue for the event is Merton College, Oxford University. This conference is being managed by Eminence Grise, is a UK based consultancy for charities.

For a press pass to the conference contact Rebecca Law on 020 7605 4291.

About the toolkit

This loneliness toolkit for health and wellbeing boards helps health and wellbeing boards to address loneliness and social isolation in their communities. The online toolkit provides:

- the latest health research on loneliness
- methods of data collection in each area to assess loneliness as a public health issue
- advice on monitoring and evaluation of loneliness interventions
- a series of tools including briefing notes, factsheets, case studies, checklists, and scales to measure loneliness.

It has been funded by the Department of Health and created by the Campaign to End Loneliness, with advice from health and wellbeing board members from across England. More information about the loneliness toolkit for health and wellbeing boards can be found at: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/toolkit

About loneliness

- Loneliness is as bad for health as smoking. It is also associated with poor mental, physical and emotional health, including increased rates of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, cognitive decline and dementia. Socially isolated and lonely adults are more likely to undergo early admission into residential or nursing care.
- Those who are lonely are at higher risk of the onset of disability and those who are deafblind are at considerable risk of loneliness.
- About 20% of the older population is lonely sometimes and another 8 to 10% is intensely lonely.
- 17% of older people are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less than once a week, and 11% are in contact less than once a month.
- Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 and over live alone.
- Half of all older people (over 5 million) say the television is their main company.
- 9% say they feel cut off from society.
- Just under 20% of older people are sometimes lonely and 6-13% of older people say they always feel lonely.

About the Campaign to End Loneliness

The Campaign to End Loneliness is a coalition of organisations and individuals working together through research, policy, campaigning and innovation to combat loneliness and inspire individuals to keep connected in older age in the United Kingdom.

We welcome new supporters of the Campaign to End Loneliness, who will be invited to campaign in their own area to raise awareness of the problem of loneliness among local health and wellbeing commissioners.

More information about the Campaign can be found at: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk
About the Campaign’s partners

The Campaign has five partners who lead the strategic direction of the Campaign:

Age UK Oxfordshire is an independent local charity with over 40 years of experience in promoting the wellbeing of older people throughout the county of Oxfordshire, and helping to make later life a fulfilling and enjoyable experience. To find out about more visit http://www.ageuk.org.uk/oxfordshire/

Independent Age is a unique and growing charity, providing information, advice and support for thousands of older people across the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It has recently merged with two other older people’s charities, Counsel and Care and Universal Beneficent Society, to provide a broader range of services than any of the charities could provide separately. www.independentage.org

Manchester City Council is the local government authority for the city and metropolitan borough of Manchester. The Council have been running Valuing Older People programme for 10 years, and in 2003 launched a ten-year strategy called ‘Manchester – A Great Place to Grow Older’. In 2010 Manchester became the only UK city to join the World Health Organisation’s network of Age-Friendly Cities.

Sense is a national charity that has supported and campaigned for children and adults who are deafblind for over 50 years. There are currently 356 000 deafblind people in the UK and this number is set to increase by 60% to 570 000 people in 2030 with the over 70s most affected (74% of deafblind people in 2030). www.sense.org.uk

WRVS provides practical help through the power of volunteering, so older people can stay independent and live the way they want. WRVS is one of the largest volunteering charities in Britain powered by 45,000 volunteers who regularly provide practical help to over 100,000 older people in their homes, communities, hospitals and during emergencies. To find out about volunteering with WRVS visit www.wrvs.org.uk

The Campaign is supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, which is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests. Based in Lisbon with branches in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support transnational work tackling contemporary issues.

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