

NEWS RELEASE

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Family doctors ill-equipped for loneliness epidemic

New research has found significant numbers of lonely people attending GP surgeries, with doctors saying they are ill-equipped to help them.

A new poll of UK GPs, carried out for the Campaign to End Loneliness, found that three quarters of family doctors (76 per cent) report that between one and five patients a day attend their surgery primarily because they are lonely [1]. This could mean that as many as one in 10 patients arriving at GPs surgeries are there not because they are medically unwell, but because they are lonely [2].

Worryingly, almost half (49 per cent) of the doctors questioned said they were not confident they had the tools necessary to help their lonely patients, with only 13 per cent of doctors confident in being able to help.

Some doctors reported even greater levels of loneliness among their patients, with 11 per cent of family doctors reporting up to 10 patients a day who they think are lonely, and four per cent of doctors seeing more than 10 lonely patients on an average day.

Kate Jopling, Director for the Campaign to End Loneliness, says: "Far too many people are feeling so lonely, and so at a loss about what to do about it, that they end up going to see their doctor. It's time we committed to a more coordinated public health response that targets resources towards better support for lonely people, and prevention of loneliness for those at risk.

"I know that many doctors will feel frustrated at not being able to help their patients but there are things they can do. There are many schemes, both public and voluntary, that can help lonely older people and the first step for doctors should be to signpost these to patients."

Almost three million people over 65 say they are lonely. About a fifth of older people say they are sometimes lonely, and between six and 13 per cent say they are always lonely [3].

Loneliness and isolation is 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.

The Campaign to End Loneliness has been working with local authorities to help them better track and support lonely older people. Critical to this effort is getting loneliness recognised as a public health issue by local health and wellbeing boards so that the best support can reach those who need it.

Kate Jopling concluded: “Loneliness is putting an unnecessary strain on local GP surgeries and social care services. Only half of the newly empowered local health and wellbeing boards have acknowledged loneliness in their strategies. This needs to increase if we are to help lonely older people and ultimately improve health outcomes in later life.” [4]

-ENDs-

Facts about loneliness [5]:

- Those who are lonely are at higher risk of the onset of disability and those who are deafblind are at considerable risk of loneliness.
- 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
- 61 of the 128 published Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies have acknowledged loneliness and/or isolation as serious issues. However, over half of all health and wellbeing boards with published strategies (53%) have not recognised that loneliness and/or isolation are issues that need addressing.

Regional breakdowns of ComRes Research

1) Thinking about the patients you see in your surgery on an average day, how many of these do you think are really attending your surgery because they are lonely?

Nation/region	1-5 patients a day	6-10 patients a day	10+ patients a day
UK (n=1007)	76%	11%	4%
England (n=134)	75%	12%	4%
Wales (n=47)	81%	11%	4%
Scotland (n=100)	83%	3%	2%
London (n=123)	71%	12%	7%
South East Coastal (n=68)	84%	6%	3%
South Central (n=65)	72%	9%	9%
South West (n=111)	74%	14%	2%
West Midlands(n=88)	75%	17%	3%
East Midlands (n=68)	85%	6%	4%
East of England (n=85)	69%	18%	4%
Yorkshire and Humberside (n=85)	78%	14%	2%
North East (n=43)	84%	5%	5%
North West (n=111)	72%	15%	5%

2) As a general practitioner, to what extent do you feel confident that you have the tools necessary to help patients who are lonely?

Nation/region	Not confident	Confident
UK (n=1007)	49%	13%
England (n=134)	47%	13%
Wales (n=47)	66%	11%
Scotland (n=100)	49%	13%
London (n=123)	45%	12%
South East Coastal (n=68)	47%	10%
South Central (n=65)	48%	11%
South West (n=111)	41%	21%
West Midlands (n=88)	39%	13%
East Midlands (n=68)	59%	9%
East of England (n=85)	45%	14%
Yorkshire and Humberside (n=85)	53%	8%
North East (n=43)	47%	16%
North West (n=111)	53%	11%

NOTES TO EDITORS

[1] ComRes interviewed 1007 UK GPs online between 16th and 22nd October 2013. Data were weighted to be nationally representative of all General Practitioners in the UK by former SHA region. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules (www.britishpollingcouncil.org). They are committed to the highest standards of transparency. You can access full data table for this research online here: www.ComRes.co.uk

[2] According to NHS England the average GP will see between [30-40 patients in a day](http://bit.ly/184gsdk) (<http://bit.ly/184gsdk>). 76 per cent of the GPs polled said that, thinking about the patients they see in an average day, between one and five patients were really attending because they are lonely.

[3] All further statistics quoted in this release regarding loneliness, and its effects on health, are the product of peer reviewed academic research. Full references for these can be found on the Campaign to End Loneliness website: <http://bit.ly/1gmGAiz>

[4] Campaign to End Loneliness, 'Ignoring the health risks?', 19 June 2013, <http://bit.ly/1aYMNer>

[5] Full referencing for these facts can be found here: <http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/>

The Campaign to End Loneliness is network of local, regional and national organisations and individuals working together through community action, good practice, policy and research to combat loneliness and isolation in the United Kingdom.

Anyone can make their voice heard in their own area by letting their local health and wellbeing board know about the problem of loneliness and isolation – more information is available on our website: <http://bit.ly/1amMJCX>

The Campaign has five partners who lead the strategic direction of the Campaign: **Age UK Oxfordshire, Independent Age, Manchester City Council, Royal Voluntary Service** and **Sense**. More information about the Campaign can be found at: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk