Doctors need to take more responsibility for loneliness

New research has found many doctors are failing to make the link between loneliness and damaging health behaviours like smoking, drinking, and poor diet.

A new poll of UK GPs has found that family doctors are under-estimating the health risks of loneliness. 36 per cent of doctors questioned didn’t think loneliness made a significant contribution to early death. [1] This was despite, for example, evidence that having poor social relationships has a greater influence on risk of early mortality than being obese. [2]

Doctors were well aware of the health risks of smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, obesity and low levels of exercise, but some seemed unaware that loneliness, as well as being a significant health risk in itself, has also been shown to be a significant contributor to the likelihood of risky behaviours. For example:

- Loneliness is a risk factor for alcohol abuse, and may make it harder to give up excessive drinking.[3]
- Being single or widowed decreases the daily variety of fruit and vegetables eaten (compared to people who live with a spouse or partner). Older adults who live alone and have infrequent contact with friends eat fewer vegetables each day. [4]
- Lonely adults are more likely to be smokers and more likely to be overweight.[5]
- Lonely adults are less likely to engage in physical activity and exercise.[6]

The Campaign to End Loneliness is calling on Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), the local GP-led organisations responsible for commissioning health services, to make more money available for schemes aimed at reducing loneliness like the £1 million recently announced by Calderdale council and Calderdale CCG. [7]

When asked if loneliness should be treated as a public health issue more than half (52 per cent) of the doctors questioned agreed it should be. [8] However, only three in 10 (28 per cent) thought Clinical Commissioning Groups should take responsibility for commissioning services to alleviate and prevent loneliness [9]

Kate Jopling, Director for the Campaign to End Loneliness, says: “By now most of us are aware that smoking, drinking too much, a poor diet and taking too little exercise is bad for us - but many of us choose to do these things anyway.

“As well as educating us about the dangers of an unhealthy lifestyle, doctors need to take an active role in addressing the root causes of poor health choices.
“When we are feeling lonely we are much less likely to look after ourselves. By helping people to maintain their social connections and relationships, or to make new ones, we can also help them to improve their health and ultimately reduce their chances of needing expensive medical care in later life.”

Ends

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. For this question doctors were asked “To what extent do you think each of the following factors contribute to early mortality?”, with loneliness being one of the four conditions tested (together with smoking, excessive drinking and obesity). Answers were given on a five-point scale, where 1 = does not contribute to early mortality and 5 = contributes a great extent towards early mortality. The 36 per cent figure is a grouping of those who answered 1, 2 or 3. 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
[8] See 1
[9] See 1

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