Greater collaboration vital to treating asthma in the young

Nick Triggle hears how the UK could do better at reducing asthma-related hospital admissions and fatalities

ASTHMA IS now so common that in every classroom there will be, on average, at least two children who have the condition. But such familiarity seems to have bred complacency. In 2014 the National Review of Asthma Deaths: Why Asthma Still Kills warned not enough was being done to reduce unnecessary admissions and deaths. The findings were shocking, but perhaps not surprising.

Many of the recommendations made – from patients needing personal action plans, to following up on emergency department visits – were well-rehearsed measures. But could we now have reached a turning point? The National Paediatric Asthma Collaborative (NPAC), an umbrella group of experts set up after the report was published to improve care, hopes so.

Its list of facts about asthma is shown in the panel, right.

Richard Iles, a respiratory and general paediatric consultant at the Evelina London Children’s Hospital and NPAC clinical lead, last year authored a document for the NPAC that called on those working in the field to capitalise on what has been set out by NHS England’s 2014 Five Year Forward View. Included in that strategy is a plan to get GP practices working together in federations which, he believes, should lead to wider access to community-based asthma specialists – many of whom are nurses. Similarly, a push to get hospital specialists out into the community running clinics should also have significant benefits.

‘It’s clear we’re not doing as well as we should be. I think over the past five years we have had something like 16 national documents setting out good quality care.’ Dr Iles says the solutions often lie in doing the ‘simple things’ well. These include making sure patients are using inhalers properly, getting regular reviews and adhering to medication.

Self-management

The work of the NPAC has been influenced by the success Finland has had in reforming asthma services. The country introduced a National Asthma Programme in the mid 1990s.

Subsequently, asthma lead doctors and nurses were appointed in each local area and supported closely by hospital specialists. The emphasis was on improving self-management, educating patients and ensuring those who needed it got speedy referrals. It was an unmitigated success: the time spent in hospital by asthma patients had fallen by more than 50% by 2003.

Dr Iles says that, while there are similar examples of good care in England, it is all too often ‘operating in isolation’.

‘The challenge for all of us now is to make sure we grasp the opportunity to bring everything together,’ he says. ‘And the encouraging thing with the Five Year Forward View is that we have the impetus.’

He believes getting it right will mean identifying those children who are most at risk, although he acknowledges they are ‘all too easy to miss’ because of the sheer numbers with the condition. University Hospitals of Leicester respiratory nurse consultant Jane Scullion agrees: ‘We need to make sure we learn from what works, particularly in terms of reaching those patients who are not using their inhalers properly. Too many are relying on relievers rather than preventers.’

Ms Scullion believes there is a big onus on the clinical lead role in primary care. ‘Many nurses are fulfilling that role and providing an excellent service. But they

UK asthma facts

- 1.1 million children have asthma
- 25,000 emergency admissions a year
- 19-fold variation in admission rates between local areas
- 1,200 deaths from asthma in 2012 and 21 of these are in children aged under 14
- There are preventable factors in nine out of ten deaths
- Half of children have experienced an asthma attack in the previous year
- Less than a quarter have a personalised asthma action plan

(National Paediatric Asthma Collaborative 2015)
Making school nurses ‘carer aware’

An award-winning Public Health England scheme is championing the ‘hidden workforce’ of young carers, writes Sophie Blakemore

THE NUMBER of children and young people who carry out a caring role in the home is unknown, but data from the 2011 census reveals that almost 250,000 people aged between five and 19 were caring for parents, siblings and others in England and Wales.

In 2014, the Department of Health, the School and Public Health Nurses Association, Queen’s Nursing Institute (QNI) and the RCN launched a programme to identify and support the wellbeing of young carers in England through integrated working between school nurses and other public health nurses.

The scheme, which is now under the remit of Public Health England (PHE), was recognised for its success in raising the profile of this hidden workforce at the Academy of NHS Fabulous Stuff’s inaugural awards.

It trains school nurses to be ‘carer aware’ and encourages them to pledge their support to the needs of this vulnerable group in their communities.

PHE lead nurse for children, young people and families Wendy Nicholson says many carers do not speak up for fear of being removed from their family homes or because professionals have failed to acknowledge their role.

“We recognised the health and wellbeing of young carers could be improved, particularly as the number of young carers is increasing year-on-year, and that school nursing teams could have a vital role to play,” Ms Nicholson says.

“We want school nurses to be skilled at identifying young carers, who may go to see them about something unrelated, by asking the right questions without probing or without it being uncomfortable for the nurse or young person.”

Signposting

School nurses are also trained to signpost young carers to other services, such as housing, financial and mental health, and provide them with practical information about caring.

From the outset young carers have been involved in shaping the initiative, even designing the artwork for a badge that the growing number of school nurse champions wear. Ms Nicholson says that there are now more than 400 champions who have made pledges, ranging from designing information about young carers for schools to whole-service redesign.

Guidance has also been launched for practitioners and commissioners, and the QNI and the RCN have developed online learning resources for school nurses.

“It’s a sustainable, low-cost but big-impact programme, making evidence-based tools, training and resources available to help school nurses work smarter,” Ms Nicholson says. ‘We are proud of what is being achieved.’

Find out more

Supporting the Health and Wellbeing of Young Carers can be downloaded at tinyurl.com/qzmcrm6

The School Nurses Supporting Young Carers Learning Resource is available at tinyurl.com/onvg55t