Project set up to prevent malnutrition in later life

Task force to oversee pilot programme that aims to improve diagnosis and treatment of condition

By Kat Keogh

NURSES WILL be tackling the ‘hidden problem’ of malnutrition in older people as part of a government-funded pilot programme launched in England last month.

The Malnutrition Prevention Project will target the over-65s with a body mass index below the healthy range of 18.5-25, and those who are losing weight without trying.

Hospital, community and practice nurses in Salford and the London borough of Lambeth will work with older people and healthcare professionals to reduce malnutrition by improving diagnosis and treatment of the condition.

The government is funding the pilot, which will last for nine to 12 months. If successful, the programme will be introduced nationally, as part of the government’s response to the Francis report.

Almost one million older people in England are malnourished or are at risk, according to the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (BAPEN). The association says that nine out of ten malnourished older people are living in the community.

Malnutrition makes people susceptible to poor health, with around 30 per cent of older patients already malnourished on admission to acute hospitals.

Community groups

Nurses and other healthcare staff from hospitals, GP surgeries and care homes will be working with community groups to raise awareness of the symptoms, which include unexplained weight loss, lack of energy and taking a long time to recover from infection.

The Malnutrition Task Force, an independent group of experts set up in 2012 to reduce malnutrition and dehydration in older people, is overseeing the project. The task force includes BAPEN and Age UK.

Age UK public services programme manager Ruth Isden said malnutrition in older people is often overlooked because it is wrongly believed that decreased appetite and weight loss are a normal part of ageing. ‘You would not ignore weight loss in a child,’ she said.

‘People can become malnourished because of physiological factors, such as a reduced appetite stemming from other conditions or medication, or social factors, such as eating alone for the first time because of the death of a loved one,’ Ms Isden added.

RCN older people’s forum chair Hazel Heath said: ‘Nurses in hospitals and care homes are key in identifying those at risk, as they can see how often and how much someone is eating.

‘In addition, community nurses can ask about the sort of food patients have in their cupboards and their shopping habits, and look out for indicators that they may be losing interest in taking care of themselves.’

Dementia guidance launched to ensure carers are supported

THE RCN and Carers Trust have published a guide to improve the care of people with dementia by ensuring support for and involvement of their carers. The Triangle of Care is made up of six standards to improve collaboration between patients, carers and healthcare workers, including the need for staff to be ‘carer aware’.

RCN general secretary Peter Carter said: ‘Carers have a lot to offer healthcare staff, as they are often the ones who know the person best.’

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The great walk of China

NURSE CONSULTANT Matthew Hodson is in training for a week-long trek along the Great Wall of China to raise funds for the British Lung Foundation.

Mr Hodson (pictured), who works for Homerton University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust in London, will walk sections of the 21,000km wall – often steep and hazardous terrain – in April for up to eight hours daily.

Named Nursing Standard’s 2013 Nurse of the Year for setting up a specialist drop-in clinic for patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, Mr Hodson aims to raise £10,000.

‘The walk will raise awareness of lung disease and other respiratory conditions such as asthma and obstructive sleep apnoea,’ he said.