There are few more disadvantaged groups in the UK than people who are homeless and have drink or drug problems. Accessing even basic services is a challenge for them, and there is often a preconception among healthcare professionals that they are going to be a problem.

The first RCN Wales nurse of the year, Louise Poley, has spent much of her career challenging such negative views of homeless people and working to improve services. Ms Poley, a nurse consultant in substance misuse at Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, says she is driven by the desire to ensure these marginalised people have equal access to health care.

Ms Poley is based at a community addiction unit in Cardiff. After qualifying as a mental health nurse in 1991, she specialised in substance misuse, working in a range of settings, including acute hospitals where she arranged alcohol screening for patients attending A&E.

Support network

Being homeless frequently leads to poor health and a poor diet, often compounded by drug or alcohol misuse. Getting these problems addressed is a challenge. Ms Poley points out that registering with a GP or receiving information about appointments is difficult without a fixed address, and expecting people with no regular income to travel long distances to attend a hospital or clinic is unrealistic.

Ms Poley’s solution has been to bring the services in Cardiff to homeless patients, creating a network of support around their needs. When she became concerned that clients were not turning up for appointments with her, she relocated one day a week to the...
Housing Options Centre in the Butetown area of the city.

Ms Poley also runs additional clinics elsewhere in the city for clients with complex needs, such as armed services veterans and those with a combination of substance misuse and mental health problems.

‘I see as many people in the housing centre as want to see me, so it can be different every week,’ she says. ‘Some will require brief advice on harm reduction, such as changing injecting behaviours, but others who want to get into specialist services will be offered full assessment and treatment.’

Ms Poley works alongside local authority staff at the housing centre to assess people and manage their treatment in the centre, rather than trying to engage them with addiction services that can be based some distance away.

‘This approach is far more effective because homeless people have high non-attendance rates at health services,’ she says. ‘It takes longer for them to engage, and they often deteriorate physically and mentally during this time. This makes the engagement process even more difficult.’

Homeless people can access other health services, such as podiatry and dental care and mental health outreach services through the centre, which effectively acts as a ‘one-stop-shop’ for many of their health needs.

Dietary improvements

To address the issue of vitamin B1 deficiency among her clients – a common problem among homeless people that can lead to cognitive impairment – Ms Poley has pioneered a service providing vitamin B1-rich and iron-rich meals that are served with brown bread.

Ms Poley says homelessness can happen to anyone. Her clients range from business people whose marriages have collapsed, to military veterans who have turned to drink to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder after multiple tours in Afghanistan.

One man she worked with was abused and neglected as a child and spent time in care. He developed drug and alcohol problems in his early teens and served several prison sentences. Barred from his GP surgery for aggressive behaviour, he failed to keep appointments with other healthcare services due to alcohol withdrawal and problems with cognitive functioning.

Over time, Ms Poley built up a therapeutic relationship with the client. Working with the local homelessness support team, she helped him to register with a GP, attend appointments and comply with the GP’s recommendations.

The man has now been heroin-free for 14 months after being stabilised on methadone, and has not touched alcohol for a year since being admitted to a specialist alcohol unit for detoxification. He also accepted intensive one-to-one and group motivational work to challenge his behaviour, build self-esteem and learn techniques for maintaining abstinence.

Now in supported accommodation, he has not committed a crime for 18 months, and is no longer a ‘repeat attender’ at hospital emergency units. He is in contact with his family for the first time in years.

Ms Poley reflects that she has specialised in taking on the cases that no one else wants. ‘Nursing skills can make a real difference to the health and wellbeing of groups such as homeless people, and I just seem to work well with them. Their humour and resourcefulness is fantastic.

She says she was ‘absolutely delighted’ to win the nurse of the year award.

‘It is fantastic to be recognised so positively by your own profession, and I was also pleased for all my colleagues in mental health and for all the clients that we work with.

‘Winning an award for my work helps me raise awareness of the challenges that vulnerable populations experience on a daily basis’ NS