Why we all have a role in detecting bowel cancer

The NHS screening programme is effective – so encouraging patients to participate will save lives

But nurses in all settings can help patients who have or may have bowel cancer – and this starts with understanding the signs and symptoms, and where to go to seek further help.

Signs and symptoms

The three common symptoms of bowel cancer are a change in bowel habit, rectal bleeding and abdominal discomfort.

However, as these symptoms are often associated with other less serious conditions, it is important we reassure patients that having one or more of these symptoms does not necessarily mean they have bowel cancer.

A change in bowel habit could be caused by irritable bowel syndrome. Similarly, abdominal discomfort could be caused by trapped wind, and rectal bleeding is more commonly due to haemorrhoids.

But if bleeding is severe or persistent, further investigations are necessary. Just because the symptoms of bowel cancer can often be attributed to other conditions, this does not mean patients should ignore them.

Bowel cancer can be difficult to diagnose by symptoms alone, so screening is an essential part of the diagnosis toolkit

Improving screening compliance will enable more early detection. It is important for nurses to encourage patients to participate in screening and have a basic understanding of what is involved.

Let’s build on success

The good news is the NHS bowel cancer screening programme has helped reduce incidence from the third to the fourth most commonly seen cancer in the UK. But the UK still falls behind many Western countries, and we need to do everything in our power to reduce rates further.

Nurses are invaluable in providing support. Being vigilant about symptoms and ensuring patients are being screened really can help save lives.