

# news



## Health services targeted at Liverpool's rising total of homeless people

**For homeless people in Liverpool, health concerns are not always top of the agenda. But Ian Harrison, homelessness nurse manager at the Brownlow Group practice, has spent the last 10 years making it his priority.**

The number of homeless people in the city has risen to more than 3,000 and the Brownlow practice homelessness outreach team has 712 registered patients, including rough and hostel sleepers.

"Some of the biggest health problems we have to deal with include long term issues such as chronic bronchitis, learning difficulties, addictions and mental health illnesses such as schizophrenia," said Harrison.

Disengaged from society,

many rough sleepers suffer from recurring illnesses that are not adequately dealt with by health professionals.

"We call it revolving door syndrome," said Harrison. "Homeless people are returning to the surgery with the same problems, for example an infected leg, but the underlying cause is not dealt with so problems keep coming back."

### Honesty important

One of the team's most crucial jobs is to ensure patients are treated as early as possible, potentially stopping smaller ailments escalating into bigger problems.

Brownlow's team runs a drop-in clinic every Thursday, visits local hostels weekly and responds to emergencies.

According to outreach team nurse Melanie Johnson, the key to treating homeless patients is to earn their respect.

"It's really important to be honest with them," she said. "If they get a hint that someone might look down on them defence mechanisms come into play and they won't engage with you. To treat them properly we need them to be honest with us so it's really important to build up that level of trust."

### Drug addiction

"For example, if someone is suffering from drug addiction, we need to know what it is they're using and how often to be able to deal with the situation properly. People will only tell us these things if they really trust us."

Aside from working closely with homeless people, the outreach team also works in conjunction with the Armistead Centre, a sexual health promotion service for gay and bisexual people and male and female sex workers.

According to NHS Liverpool Community Health's head of communications, James Brown, the centre's figures indicate Liverpool's sex worker population has decreased in the past few years, with the annual number of patients falling from 471 in 2005 to 304 in 2009. But Harrison said that prostitution is often a hidden problem, with exact figures difficult to come by.

### Funding uncertainty

"The sex workers may be homeless or not, but they often suffer similar sorts of medical problems," he said.

"The most common ones include abuse at the hands of clients and mental health issues."

He added that while many sex workers regularly come in for sexually transmitted disease screening, most are careful with protection as their incomes depend on their sexual health.

Currently the outreach team is considered an enhanced NHS service and is funded by the local primary care trust. But with financial cuts looming in all parts of the public sector, the service's future remains uncertain.

"We have to apply for the money for the enhanced services every three years and we're still in our first year," said Harrison. "We'll just have to wait and see if we face cuts after that."

And while Harrison admitted that nursing the homeless can be a "thankless job" it's a necessary one nevertheless.

"People often ask me why I work with the homeless population," he said. "To be honest I think most people are only a few mortgage payments away from homelessness and anyone could end up in that position."

LIZZIE CERNIK