

# **Hope and Healthcare**

## **Hilltop Surgery, Hope Citadel Practice, Fitton Hill**

### **Introduction**

The doctor's surgery is the central point of exchange between residents and health professionals – yet areas of deprivation pose additional challenges such as the poor health associated with poverty and unemployment. Demanding circumstances, a heavy workload and non-medical mental and social complexities combine to mean that the best and most qualified professionals often do not choose to establish their careers in deprived communities. The irony is that because of these very difficulties, underprivileged localities need the best doctors.

How can these obstacles be overcome to bring about sustainable improvements in the health of local people, particularly in disadvantaged regions? How can compassionate, high-quality care improve the lives of patients and communities?

### **Origins of the project**

The Hilltop Surgery is based in the deprived Fitton Hill area on the outskirts of Oldham, yet consistently attracts top GPs and delivers commendable results. Along with three other surgeries that make up the Hope Citadel Practice, the Hilltop Surgery was established by a Fitton Hill resident.

Motivated by a strong sense of social justice, and dismayed at the community's poor GP provision, Laura Neilsen put in a bid to the local PCT and established the surgery, drawing on government funding designated for GP practices in deprived areas.

"It was a fast learning curve and we certainly didn't get everything right first time," says Neilsen. "In just six months we went from submitting our bid to receiving hundreds of thousands of pounds of funding through the contract."

### **Partnership working**

Meaningful relationships extend beyond the surgery's doors – the organisation is actively involved in the community, sponsoring the local football team and helping launch the Fitton Factor Choir.

### **Approach and delivery**

Hilltop Surgery adheres to a 'Focused Care' method which places the patient in the context of their family, understanding their relationships and reflecting the importance of family to an individual's wellbeing. There is a considerable investment of time and effort – the typical GP consultation is three minutes longer than the national average (10 minutes). This approach helps to build a trusting relationship which results in uncovering patients' real needs and issues.

"These can be hostile places, with predatory opportunists ready to take advantage of the vulnerable," says Neilsen, so it's important they're encouraged to develop friendships and circles of friends who are stable and will help them look out for each other."

A second characteristic of the Focused Care approach is the importance placed on residents' stories. "We think of ourselves as a 'narrative-based' practice," says GP John Patterson, Hope Citadel's clinical director. "We teach patients to tell their stories. Then we try to fix those stories – and we share those stories with each other. This is central to the way we work."

The emphasis on encouraging patients to share and take ownership of their own stories is a crucial facet of delivering effective whole person healthcare. It surfaces hidden drivers of conditions, for instance abuse as the real source of mental health problems, or hardship that is the reason behind repeat prescriptions. When Hope Citadel's Hollingwood practice was opened, doctors diagnosed 24 cancers in new patients, ie pre-existing, undiagnosed conditions.

A further value is 'humility in the face of brokenness'. Efforts to develop a deep understanding of patients are rooted in awareness of the limitations of even the most gifted well-equipped professional. As a Community Interest Company in a deprived area, GPs know they will work harder and earn less. However the clarity of value and purpose continues to attract top doctors who are keen to serve communities and bring about positive change.

### **Success and outcomes**

Greater trust between residents and Hilltop Surgery has improved preventative care, with the children's vaccination rate reaching 94%. The support and care for individuals in a weight loss group resulted in more weight loss than those in a drug trial. A patient group of 4,000 (across two practices) did not experience a single heart attack in 2012.

The practice also has a track record of delivering significantly better results than standard benchmarks.

### **Future plans and obstacles**

The success of Focused Care in residents' lives has been recognised, and the organisation has been asked to extend the approach and deliver it in neighbouring practices. But Hope Citadel is also struggling to secure funding for its own practice work.

### **Conclusion**

An emphasis on patients taking ownership for their own health narratives combined with compassionate, high-quality care has meant Hope Citadel is transforming a deprived area, boosting health outcomes and improving the community.