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Trial shows Social Workers in general practice improve health outcomes

As a first in Australia, a trial has demonstrated that co-locating Social Workers in general practice can improve patient health outcomes. ACT's Primary Health Network, Capital Health Network (CHN) funded 4 general practices in this innovative trial to support people with complex social and health needs.

University of Canberra's independent evaluation of the trial found that Social Workers in the general practice team enhanced patient comprehensive care, addressed social patient issues and eased issues related to limited GP consultation times. Over 500 patients were supported through the trial.

GP Dr Paresh Dawda at Next Practice Deakin, one of 4 general practices involved in the trial, explained that so much of what is managed in general practice is shaped by the wider determinants of health, including loneliness, emotional distress, financial insecurity and housing instability.

"Social Workers embedded in general practice are an invaluable part of the team. They bring specialist skills and knowledge that complement clinical care, helping patients navigate complex social issues and access the right support. Their involvement not only improves patient wellbeing, but also enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of the care we provide," said Dr Dawda.

Fisher Family Practice's Social Worker, Donna Bainbridge said we know that a person's health is affected by not only their physical issues, but psychological distress and social challenges, such as work or family.

"As a Social Worker, recognising that partnering with our GPs, patients, their families and their broader care team is to build a bio-psychosocial infrastructure, which leads to better patient health outcomes," said Ms Bainbridge.

CHN CEO Stacy Leavens said the inclusion of Social Workers in general practice allowed them to work with the general practice team to provide holistic care and connect patients to the right service at the right time.

"It can be difficult to access a Social Worker in the community, so patients appreciated seeing a Social Worker in their own general practice. Patients were highly satisfied with the care. For example, Social Workers were liaising on patients' behalf with services such as Centrelink, NDIS and Housing ACT to assist them in accessing the services that they needed," said Ms Leavens.

CHN funded Next Practice Deakin, Fisher Family Practice, Interchange Health Co-op and Wakefield Gardens Surgery as part of the trial. The independent evaluation report of the Social Workers in General Practice Program is at www.chnact.org.au