Extra cash helps patients cope with cancer

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Welfare rights advice has been shown to help patients with cancer and their carers receive millions in unclaimed benefits to help cope with the disease.

A Newcastle University study found that some cancer patients and their families experienced severe financial strain following their cancer diagnosis and treatment. However, when they received expert assistance from professional welfare rights advice services it lessened the impact of lost earnings and helped people afford the additional costs associated with cancer.

Over £14 million has been raised in additional social security benefits and Macmillan grants for people affected by cancer since the service started in 2008.

Publishing in PLos ONE, the researchers reveal that those below state

pension age obtained benefits worth £115 per week on average. For those over state pension age the average weekly amount was £70. Importantly, most patients (96%) who received advice went on to successfully claim extra benefits.

As a consequence, stress associated with money worries reduced, patients were able to concentrate on themselves and their families and the overall effect was to increase their ability to cope with cancer.

Dr Suzanne Moffatt, Senior Lecturer at Newcastle University who specialises in tackling health and social inequalities, led the study. She said: "The findings of our research demonstrate the huge benefits that welfare rights advice can have for people affected by cancer, particularly the positive psychological and social impacts, which enhance patients' ability to cope with the illness."

Health professionals such as GPs and community nurses also became more aware of benefits that their patients could access and over time they were more likely to advise their patients to seek this help.

Martin White, Professor of Public Health at Newcastle University said: "Cancer is one of the most common diseases and many patients and their families do not currently get access to the benefits that they are entitled to. Our study demonstrates that welfare rights services working closely with cancer care services can overcome this problem."

Dr Moffatt added: "Public sector cuts are having a serious impact on welfare rights advice services and it is important that these services are protected to enable cancer patients and their families to access this help."

It is estimated that nine out of ten cancer patients' households experience loss of income as a direct result of cancer. Help to alleviate this is

available in the form of state benefits and one-off grants, but the benefit system is complex and difficult to negotiate, especially for people dealing with the effects of cancer treatment such as fatigue, pain and nausea.

A collaboration between Macmillan Cancer Support and Durham County Council in North East England funded three welfare rights officers to provide dedicated welfare rights service for people affected by cancer.

Stephen Guy, development manager for Macmillan Cancer Support in Durham, Tees Valley and North Yorkshire said: "This evaluation has provided invaluable detail about the needs and wants of people affected by cancer. This research demonstrates that Macmillan Cancer Support's investments in creating welfare benefit and financial support services are at the heart of dealing with the financial impact a cancer diagnosis can have on patients, families and carers.

"The monies secured by the welfare rights officers is used by claimants to pay for bare necessities or essential services and items, including heating, food, clothing or transport to and from medical appointments, at this most difficult time.

"A significant number of people who participated in the evaluation spoke of their gratitude and relief at having an officer available to assist them navigate the very complex welfare benefit system and explained that they would not have managed financially without access to this type of service. The Macmillan and Durham County Council team have worked tirelessly to raise over £14 million since 2008 for people affected by cancer in County Durham. Their efforts and achievements should not be underestimated. "

Researchers at Newcastle University found that a success rate of 96% was achieved from 1540 benefit claims between April 2009 and March

2010. For those below state pension age, the average value of benefits obtained was £115 per week and for those over state pension age the average weekly amount was £70. Between 2010 and 2011, the County Council's Macmillan Welfare Rights service raised £3.75 million in additional social security benefits and Macmillan grants for people affected by cancer.

More information: Moffatt S, Noble E, White M (2012) Addressing the financial consequences of cancer: qualitative evaluation of a welfare rights advice service. *PLoS ONE* 7(8):e42979.doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0042979

Provided by Newcastle University

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