

## Research shows rise in GPs prescribing exercise for depression

The last three years have seen a significant rise in the number of GPs prescribing exercise to people with mild to moderate depression, according to new research from the Mental Health Foundation

The charity says that almost a third (22%) of GPs now prescribe exercise therapy as one of their three most common treatments for depression compared with only 5% three years ago.

The new figures also show a change in GPs' beliefs about exercise therapy. Almost two-thirds of GPs (61%) now believe a supervised programme of exercise to be 'very effective' or 'quite effective' in treating mild to moderate depression, in comparison to 41% three years ago. And two thirds of GPs (66%) who currently do not have access to an exercise referral scheme say they would use one if it were available.

1 in 6 GPs (16%) have noticed an increase in the number of people asking whether exercise would be a suitable treatment for their depression.

While this is welcome, race equality groups are keen to ensure that research that shows, African Caribbean patients needing mental health care are routinely misdiagnosed or turned away from their GP according to findings in the Count Me In Census published in September last year.

The Mental Health Foundation has been campaigning for the last three years to increase the use of exercise referral for mild to moderate depression. The charity warns that despite growing interest among patients and changes to GP attitudes, exercise on prescription is still not widely available - with less than half of GPs (49%) able to access an exercise therapy referral scheme for people with depression.

"It is excellent news that GPs are now turning to exercise therapy to help people with depression. There is a real need for increased availability of exercise on prescription so that it is accessible alongside antidepressant medication and psychological therapies. Depression is a complex illness - it is important that GPs have a range of treatments to offer and that people with depression have a choice," Andrew McCulloch, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation, said.

The Mental Health Foundation is now working to expose the barriers that prevent exercise therapy from being offered universally. The research programme, partly funded by the Department of Health, involves the charity working with six sites across England that run exercise referral schemes.

Race equality groups are keen to see that black patients are included in this scheme in order to ensure those routinely marginalised from therapeutic care are not sidelined from this new drive.

'This sort of scheme is welcome and is just the sort of thing that African Caribbean patients need to be involved in. We are all keenly aware of the punitive treatment offered to black patients who are normally left languishing on hospital wards with absolutely nothing to do. An opportunity for fresh air and exercise would not only offer them a welcome break, but would also show that the discrimination they face is being challenged through this sort of inclusion,' BMH UK spokesman said.

The research findings will be published in early 2009, in addition to a toolkit that will include practical advice on setting up and delivering an exercise referral scheme, as well as training packages for referrers in primary care and industry staff involved in exercise therapy delivery.

Two information booklets about exercise and depression are available from the Mental Health Foundation - 'How exercise can help beat depression' for patients and 'Exercise referral and the treatment of mild or moderate depression' for GPs and healthcare practitioners.

The report *Up And Running?* Has been published by the Mental Health Foundation to promote exercise therapy for mild or moderate depression as a realistic and readily available tool for GPs, and a genuine option that patients can both understand and choose for themselves.

