ENRICH: a new innovation to facilitate dementia research in care homes

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There are currently almost three times as many care home beds as NHS hospital beds in England, and the number is projected to rise significantly by 2019 (Laing and Buisson, 2009). The majority of care homes have no on-site nursing and are dependent on community nurses to assess, advise and support residents’ healthcare needs. Community nurses can spend significant amounts of time in care homes, on average 4–6 hours a week, and in some cases, up to 27 hours (Goodman et al, 2003; 2005). However, there is no set way in which they work with care homes to support this often frail population, two-thirds of whom have dementia (Alzheimer’s Society, 2007). Their input is often determined by what care home staff are unable to do (Perry et al, 2004). Older people in care homes are sometimes involved in research, but are often overlooked, even though they have complex needs and would benefit from interventions to improve health care. Similarly, care home research that links with community nurses has the potential to clarify their role in this setting, and the support they give to care home staff and residents, especially in relation to dementia care. A recent Ministerial Advisory Group on Dementia Research highlighted networks of research care homes as one way of working with them to improve care, share information and expertise, improve standards, develop staff and facilitate recruitment to studies (Department of Health (DH), 2011).

ENRICH
ENRICH (Enabling Research in Care Homes) is a new initiative, which aims to augment the amount and quality of dementia and other neurodegenerative research in care homes, by increasing care home awareness and support of research and improving their links with researchers.

ENRICH has two main components: the toolkit, and the ENRICH care home network.

ENRICH toolkit
The ENRICH toolkit, launched in February, is a new website on research in care homes (http://www.dendron.org.uk/enrich). The website will act as a resource for care home staff, residents and their relatives or significant others, and researchers working with care homes. It gives information and guidance on different types of research, how care homes can take part, and what it involves in practice. The focus is on dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases, but it should act as a useful resource for any research in care homes, as the same principles will apply regardless of the topic area.

ENRICH care home network
The ENRICH care home network is in the process of being set up and piloted, to promote and support care home participation in research studies, work collaboratively with care homes and, ultimately, improve researcher access to and recruitment of older people with dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases.

How primary care practitioners can get involved
Care home research is a complex and challenging process in terms of the ethics, consent and governance processes, together with the issues that relate specifically to carrying out research in the care home environment itself. However, it has the potential to promote closer working between community nurses and care home staff while increasing residents’ quality of life. The ENRICH toolkit is accessible to both community nurses and care home staff, and can act as a shared focus to facilitate the research process. As well as providing information, it outlines the ways that professionals can support research in care homes. Although the emphasis is on dementia, it is invaluable for all researchers or anyone who has an interest in or need for information on any aspect of care home research. Case studies are used to illustrate the challenges and rewards of care home involvement in research, together with numerous links to other related websites. Primary care practitioners will find it a useful source of information for their own practice, as well as an invaluable resource for students, care home staff and managers.

Contact the Enrich team
The ENRICH team welcomes any feedback or suggestions from practitioners on the new website. For further information or to become involved, please contact Natasha Carrick, Communications officer.

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