

Fuel poverty in a changing world: factors influencing older people keeping warm at home.

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Background

Cold, damp housing is linked to health problems, health inequalities and excess winter deaths. Older people in fuel poverty are susceptible to the negative impacts of living in a cold home (Liddell & Morris 2010, Marmot Review Team 2011). The study explores factors influencing the ability for older people to keep warm and in accessing help to assist them in doing so. The presentation reflects on the meaning of these findings as the public health environment changes. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health.

Methods

Semi-structured in-depth interviews and Framework Analysis. 50 older people and 25 health and social care staff were recruited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews. In addition six focus groups were conducted, three with older people with over 40 participants in total, one with staff (n=8), and two with strategic leads in the public (n=5) and third sector (n=8). The study was conducted in an area with high levels of fuel poverty in England.



Results

Understanding and awareness: of the link between warmth and health were low amongst staff and older people. Participants revealed poor knowledge about appropriate room temperatures, fuel payment and tariffs, and heating technology. This impaired ability to heat the home well.

- a. "They get to the stage where they will switch it off, they'll wrap up but they don't understand the importance of the house being warm because they've lived in conditions like that for many years when they were younger, damp cold houses, and they don't realise the effect it can have on their health." (S8)
- b. "They'll not do direct debits a lot of them, they don't know how to do it.... even writing a cheque basically, almost impossible for a lot of older people because they don't know, they've never done it; they've always dealt in cash." (S12)
- c. "They do struggle, we do get asked to help....When the clocks change I have to go to my mothers to change the boiler." (S16)
- c. "Well, I don't know how to work that one in there [the programmer]. I want it going off and coming on when I want to do it....I just come down in the morning, switch it on, and when I go up at night I switch it off. You know, so I don't know the first thing about working that boiler." (OP1)

Previous experience and mistrust: of banks and utility companies also influenced behaviour in older people.

- "She thinks that she doesn't trust them [banks]; they might charge more with direct debit." (OP6)
- "I don't believe in using cards because you have to remember so many numbers, and besides which when you pay by direct debit you've got no receipt." (OP8)
- "I daren't put the heating on any more you see." (OP8)
- "I think the energy companies are wrong though because what they've done is they've made people never believe them any more." (OP 27)

Social connections^a, values and mindsets^b: influenced the ability of older people to overcome barriers, heat their home and pay for their fuel.

- a. "My son pays the bill." (OP19)
- b. "No, I grew up in what was called and two up and two down, which was a terraced house. We had an outside loo, we had a cold water tap and a fire which did the cooking and heated a kettle.....There was a coal fire. You had a brick heated in the oven or an oven plate out of the oven, a metal plate wrapped in a blanket into the bed at night. Loads of bedding, and you wore more clothes. You wore more clothes, you had more exercise, we walked more, we didn't have cars, we didn't have central heating....I was trained to be frugal, it was part of my upbringing. You didn't have a lot so you were careful with what you did have. And with the costs rising now, I'm certainly not extravagant with the heating, I'm very wary." (OP34)

The invisibility of fuel consumption and money: also influenced their decisions regarding keeping warm. They erred on the side of caution and turned heating down.

- "I don't know what the bill will be with this, this time round, but everybody says it'll eat it up. But you see I don't put the gas on." (OP6)



Conclusions

The findings raise some challenges and opportunities to public health as the structures within which it operates are changing. Whilst the move of public health to local authorities may help develop partnership approaches to address some of the problems raised, there are also restraints that may frustrate attempts to overcome barriers identified. These include finance, workload changes and pressures and increased reliance on technology. In addition this study indicates why older people may struggle to respond positively to some recent affordable warmth policy proposals. Examples include the introduction of the Green Deal, introduction of smart meters, and welfare reform. A need is identified to develop interventions to influence decision making, support health and social care professionals and increase uptake of help available.

Illustrative case study.

The example cited here explains how understanding, awareness, type of social connections, values and the invisible nature of fuel consumption and payment can conspire against older people keeping warm at home.

An 80 years old woman lives with her son whom she trusts. She hardly leaves the house unless she has a medical appointment. She does not speak English and has a number of chronic health problems. She is totally dependent on her primary caregiver, her 51 year old son. He is active in the community and uses the computer to connect to the Internet every day. In addition, the participant's daughter lives one mile away and her grandchildren who are over 20 years old live just a block away. Thus, the participant's close family members are literate and connected to their wider social cultural group. Her house is below the advised temperature in the day and at night on most occasions. The family had scant information about heating technology. The son had good social connections but not with people who were informed about heating technology or fuel tariffs. They paid for their fuel with cash as they did not understand direct debits or social tariffs on fuel. The old lady used an electric heater in her bedroom to supplement heating which is an expensive form of heating. The participant trusted information from her son because he was well educated and spoke both English and her native tongue. However, her son was not informed in a way that could help her keep warm.

References

Liddell C, Morris C. (2010) Fuel poverty and human health: A review of recent evidence. Energy Policy 38 2987-2997

Marmot Review Team (2011). The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty. Friends of the Earth England

