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Social workers must embrace telecare for service users to realise full benefits

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When it comes to care and support planning under the Care Act 2014, social workers hold a degree of responsibility for understanding what's available locally for service users to meet their client's needs and outcomes, including how telecare can best be utilised.

With an increasing drive to develop new models of care that reduce the demand on more costly interventions, we at the Housing Learning and Improvement Network – in partnership with Tunstall Healthcare – have addressed some of the most frequently asked questions in a bid to eliminate misconceptions that social workers and other professionals might hold.

Telecare know-how

We are aware that often people do not know what technology is actually available to them. For this reason, it is important that adult social care staff who have contact with service users know about the latest technology enabled solutions and are able to discuss them with service users in receipt of respite care, domiciliary care or even faced with a move to residential care.

In terms of raising awareness and educating on behalf of social workers themselves, we would certainly recommend regular professional awareness training programmes. An upfront commitment to and investment in bespoke training programmes for all teams by councils and other social work employers indicates you are working towards a holistic service which will improve outcomes for individuals and can create longer-term efficiencies in managing your caseload.

Attitudes to technology

People are frequently concerned over a lack of confidence in the use of technology and social workers in particular can often be risk averse towards telecare. We have found that for social care staff, including social workers and senior managers, using technology creates confidence in it, enhancing both the delivery of and access to homecare services and improving case management.

When staff members are able to witness the real positive impact that technology can have on the lives of service users, we find this to be a great motivator. Telecare can provide a 24-7 safeguarding service and mean that

the scarce resource of domiciliary care can be targeted where the need is greatest, including out-of-hours. This way, we are utilising care services uniquely to do the things they can uniquely do, but in the meantime, with the knowledge that support is on hand 24 hours a day.

Life stories

Social workers are also frequently met by service users who have a lack of confidence, capacity and/or sometimes even a fear of technology. When it comes to attitudes to technology, seeing is believing and examples of real life stories are the key to overcoming these concerns. The way to describe it is not as technology, but by the outcomes and benefits it provides for people. The use of videos, a bank of stories, face to face discussions, workshops and meetings are all important things to consider when describing the benefits.

People with dementia experience a diverse range of individual challenges in their daily lives. However, we know there are a number of recurrent problems which many people experience, such as problems with persona, time or place orientation, task initiation or prompting and anxiety. Any one of these can have a major impact on the quality of life for a person with a memory loss, affecting the safety of the carer or cared for person.

Dementia support

Technology products, such as low-cost voice recorders or displays, can be used to address these problems and maintain the independence of the person with dementia. There are a number of reasons why they are not more widely used including lack of awareness of the technology, uncertainty about the suitability or how to apply them for a particular individual or care environment, and limited awareness of their effectiveness.

In particular, clients may be concerned about whether or not technology could lead to social isolation. What telecare does is give communities and people more control – this is about increasing choice, with support targeted where and when it is needed the most. This is a complimentary to other services rather than a replacement. Technology is about helping the person maintain independence, choice and self-determination so they can live life to the full, key tenets of promoting wellbeing under the Care Act.

What telecare can do

Many people are keen to know the practical applications which technology can support and as a social worker you may be met with similar queries from your clients. Technology can aid with a number of activities of daily living such as cooking or medication. Options for prompting with medication are useful applications to both the social worker and the service user. For medication, it is essential to get doses and times right. Medication management can be carried out through medication monitoring which provides prompts and sends out calls from the telecare monitoring centre when medication isn't taken. Reminder functionality, via a lifeline home unit, can be easily set up also;

managing the number of visits social workers and/or other care staff need to make and increasing the independence of service users.

Cooking and making meals is another important part of daily living activities. For individuals who live on their own, smoke detectors, temperature extremes sensors and gas alarms can be linked to telecare alarm systems. Intelligent cookers are also available which can minimize risk by detecting that the cooker hob is on but with no pan, so will turn itself off as well as being able to set time periods for cooking. Apps that provide video chat functionality can be used by service users and social workers or care staff to enable individuals to be supported during the cooking process and maintain user safety.

Are you switched on to telecare?

Every revolution seems impossible at the beginning but after it happens it seems inevitable. In order for telecare to reach its full potential there needs to be commitment from all participants; GPs, district nurses, social workers, relatives and most important of all, the service user themselves. However, it is not an easy achievement. The important part is that the technology is correctly accessed and applied, with the person at the centre of decision-making.

If you would like to see the full report, view it on our website here.

Published on Monday, 18 April 2016 by Community Care