Updates

NICE public health guidance: what’s new?

Amanda Killoran, Patti White, Lesley Owen, Louise Millward, Alastair Fischer

Centre for Public Health Excellence, NICE, London, UK
Address correspondence to Amanda Killoran, E-mail: amanda.killoran@nice.org.uk

NICE published two pieces of public health guidance during September–October:

- Guidance for the NHS and other sectors on what works in driving down population mortality rates in disadvantaged areas where risk of early death is higher than average.
- Guidance for Occupational therapy and physical activity interventions to promote the mental wellbeing of older people in primary care and residential care.

Developing public health guidance: methodological issues

NICE public health guidance is based on the ‘best available evidence’ on the questions of effectiveness and cost effectiveness, but also equity, acceptability and implementation and delivery of interventions. This means that reviews of evidence involve the use of a ‘typology’ of study designs and methods (rather than the traditional hierarchy used in the review of clinical interventions). This typology defines the most appropriate study design and methods to answer these different research questions. Although experimental study designs are normally the ‘gold standard’ for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, for certain public health interventions, the use of randomized controlled trials are impractical or unethical, and do not necessarily help explain the differential impact of interventions across different population groups. Issues of acceptability and population coverage and delivery are most appropriately investigated using observational studies and qualitative methods.

This is one of a range of methodological issues that are addressed as part of the process of public health guidance development. The Centre for Public Health Excellence is currently consulting on the revised methods and process manuals that are used to develop public health guidance. Please participate in the consultation through www.nice.org.uk/ under current consultations. The closing date for comments is 2 January 2009.

Profile of two selected pieces of guidance

Promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing in primary education (public health guidance 12)

www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/PH12

This guidance is underpinned by the life course perspective. Children’s social and emotional wellbeing is important in its own right but also because it is an important predictor of health and social outcomes in adult life. This guidance is the first in a suite of guidance concerned with promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people.

The guidance recommends that all primary schools should adopt a comprehensive whole school approach to children’s social and emotional wellbeing. At a strategic level, this commitment should be included in the Children and Young People’s Plan, and schools and local authority children’s services should work closely with child and...
adolescent mental health and other services to develop and agree local protocols.

The guidance specifies that the whole school approach should comprise both universal and targeted activities. Universal approaches include a curriculum for social and emotional skills development, training and development of teachers and other practitioners, support to parents and integration of activities for the development of social and emotional skills in all aspects of school life. Teachers should be trained to identify and assess children, who are showing early signs of emotional and social difficulties, and be able to request involvement of a specialist where appropriate. A range of interventions should be provided according to the child’s needs and be part of a multi-agency approach to support the child and their family.

Lack of investment in mental health promotion in primary schools is likely to lead to significant costs for society. Children, who experience emotional and social problems are more likely at some point to misuse drugs and alcohol, have lower educational attainment, be untrained, unemployed or involved in crime. An integrated approach using universal and targeted interventions was considered to be cost effective; preventing the negative behaviours that can lead to costly consequences for the NHS, social services and the criminal justice system.

Guidance on preventing the uptake of smoking by children and young people (public health guidance 14)

http://www.nice.org.uk/Guidance/PH14

The latest addition to the suite of NICE public health guidance on smoking deals with preventing children and young people from becoming smokers. Focusing on mass-media and point-of-sales measures, specifically sales of tobacco to those under 18 years, the guidance is aimed at all those with a remit to improve the health and wellbeing of this important population. The guidance emphasizes that these measures should be a part of the comprehensive strategy to decrease smoking in the whole population, including campaigns targeting adults.

Recommendations on mass media approaches for under-18s address principles of campaign development, such as using research to identify the nature and needs of the target audience, the types of messages that should be effective with young people and the strategies that should be employed, such as exploiting the full range of media used by children and young people.

The legal age of purchase of tobacco was recently raised to 18 and the guidance focuses on measures that national government can take to support local authorities, magistrates and others to ensure better enforcement of the current legislation. Much of the burden of stopping children from buying cigarettes falls on retailers, and the guidance makes recommendations to local authorities and trading standards bodies on ways to help retailers avoid illegal sales both by vending machines and over the counter purchase.

New referrals

Recent new topic referrals to the Centre for Public Health Excellence cover:

- Primary prevention of Type 2 diabetes mellitus in high risk black and minority ethnic groups
- Reduction of accidental injuries to children (under 15 years) in the external environment
- Promotion of the social and emotional wellbeing of children in early years in (i) preschool settings and (ii) the home
- Prevention and reduction of transmission of HIV among those at high risk

All NICE guidance, published and in progress, is available at: www.nice.org.uk/guidance