

The Marmot NHS Trust approach could help NHS organisations tackle health inequalities

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East London NHS Foundation Trust and the UCL Institute of Health Equity have developed a “Marmot NHS Trust” approach to taking action on the underlying social causes of ill health, and advocate for other trusts to follow suit

NHS trusts can and should go beyond the “downstream” provision of healthcare to tackle the “upstream” social causes of ill health in the communities they serve, which often have a greater impact on health than healthcare services. The link between people’s health and their socio-economic circumstances is clear—the poorer you are, the higher your risk of physical and mental ill health. [1] Health inequalities in our society are stark and growing—new analysis by the Institute of Health Equity has shown that over one million people in England died earlier than they would have if they had lived in the richest 10% of areas, between 2011 and the start of the covid-19 pandemic in 2019. [2] The lives of people in the most deprived parts of England are being cut short by about 10 years, and they are spending nearly 20 fewer years of their shorter lifespans in good health, compared to people in the most affluent areas. [3] The NHS as a sector has considerable power and potential to go some way towards rebalancing the scales of social justice in a society in which the poorest have been hit hardest by a troika of government policies of austerity, the covid-19 pandemic, and most recently, the cost of living crisis.

Tackling the social determinants of health is not only morally imperative, it also represents a pragmatic approach to reducing demand on our services. Undertaking this work is by no means an easy task, given the crisis conditions the NHS faces, but going beyond the hospital walls to improve population health is exactly what we need to do if we are ever going to bring our services back from breaking point.

East London NHS Foundation Trust (ELFT) has taken a novel approach to this challenge by partnering with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to become the first “Marmot NHS Trust” in the UK. As such, the Trust is exploring how a NHS organisation can implement the Marmot principles, a set of evidence-based policy objectives to reduce health inequalities, such as; “Give every child the best start in life”, “Create fair employment and good work for all”, and “Ensure a healthy standard of living for all”. [1] As part of its “Marmot Trust” approach, ELFT made improving population health a strategic priority, and integrated the Marmot principles into its 5-year strategy for 2021-26.

The Trust recognised its significant social responsibility to tackle health inequalities, as a community and mental health trust serving some of the most deprived communities in the country in east London, Luton, and Bedfordshire. In east London, Tower Hamlets has the highest child poverty rate in the UK, with over 50% of children living in poverty (after taking housing costs into account), and Newham has the highest rate of households in temporary accommodation of all London boroughs, at nearly 50 per 1,000 households. [4,5] A man

born in Luton can expect to live about 60 years in good health—a decade less than a more fortunate resident of Richmond in west London. [5]

ELFT is far from the only NHS trust that is working to improve population health and reduce health inequalities—but using the Marmot principles as a framework, and integrating them into the Trust's strategy, has helped to provide a systematic and strategic approach to such work and keep a strong focus on equity. ELFT is now over two years into its journey as a Marmot NHS Trust, showing that it is not only morally desirable, but also entirely possible, for NHS trusts to take action on the social determinants of health. We strongly encourage others to go beyond the clinic walls and do the same.

Some practical ways in which ELFT has taken action on the social determinants of health have included piloting the provision of welfare and financial advice in its children's clinical services, developing a training offer for employers in Luton to advocate for good quality work (i.e. better pay and conditions), and facilitating access to employment at the Trust for its service users and local people facing barriers to the labour market. In relation to the latter, ELFT has set up quality improvement projects in Newham and Luton to make its recruitment practices more inclusive, which have involved linking with the local councils' employability programmes to recruit healthcare support workers and administrative workers. Further, ELFT is including a mandatory requirement in all new contracts for suppliers to pay their staff at least the Real Living Wage (set by the Living Wage Foundation based on the cost of living), as well as supporting existing suppliers to do so, with the aim of having 100% of suppliers compliant by 2025. [6,7]

The cost of living crisis has shown that it is more important than ever for NHS organisations to take action on the social determinants of health. Health inequalities are deepening—rising food and energy prices are hitting the poorest hardest, impacting living conditions and damaging health. For example, cold homes can cause or worsen respiratory conditions, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health. [8]

There is much that NHS trusts can do to tackle the social determinants of health, as demonstrated by ELFT's "Marmot NHS Trust" approach, which serves as a model for other trusts to use the Marmot principles as a strategic framework to guide such work.

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