

Help at hand coming for chronic conditions

Mental health issues can prove an extra challenge for people living with long-term and chronic conditions



INTERVIEW WITH
Jessamy Baird
General Manager, General Medicines BU, Country Lead, Sanofi UK & Ireland



INTERVIEW WITH
Jason Bonnett
Diabetes Head of Marketing, General Medicines BU, Sanofi UK & Ireland

WRITTEN BY
Mark Nicholls

People living with long-term chronic conditions often face the additional burden of the impact on their mental health. But while digital solutions can offer support via remote monitoring for cardiovascular disease, diabetes or lung conditions, technological support for mental health is less advanced. This is against a backdrop of the NHS, and health systems globally, under severe strain from the COVID-19 pandemic with stretched finances and staffing resources, and mental health services facing ever-increasing demands.

Patient self-care

Jessamy Baird, from pharmaceutical company Sanofi, believes there is an appetite for digital solutions within the NHS, accelerated by COVID-19, which has seen more remote consultations and a shift in patient mindset.

“Rather than people thinking about going to the GP, they are more used to email and text, so this is a great time for digital innovation,” says Baird, who is General Manager of Sanofi’s General Medicines sector and Country Lead, UK & Ireland. “We know the NHS has capacity issues and there are substantial workforce challenges, so we need to enhance that with self-care for patients with devices. We think there is a new willingness to adopt these technologies. But it is much bigger than just physical wellbeing, it is about mental health too.”

Chronic conditions

At present, there are 15 million people in England with chronic conditions. While challenges remain over access to and availability of technology, there are increasing opportunities to offer virtual support to patients as the NHS moves towards a ‘digital first’ mindset and is partnering with commercial organisations to advance this.

With expertise in chronic disease therapies and established country networks, Sanofi believes it has a role to play in this technical shift, particularly with a solution that focuses more on mental health and wellbeing of people with chronic conditions than on physical intervention.

Jason Bennett, Head of Marketing, General Medicines at Sanofi UK & Ireland, says: “We know that people with long-term conditions may have a worse outcome if they also have a mental health condition.

“Because of that, it is enshrined in the NHS National Framework that people with long-term conditions should have access to psychological support, however due to capacity constraints fewer than 15% of people with diabetes have access to psychological support.”

Mental health solution

In looking to address this gap in mental health support, Sanofi is working with a tech firm and partnering with the NHS through the Academic Health Science Network to develop a solution that can support the unmet mental health needs of people with chronic conditions.

While at the proof-of-concept stage, the hope is to have the solution available by next year, with the aim of offering a preventive solution to individuals before their mental health issues escalate.

The artificial intelligence-driven solution is aiming to reduce the burden of mental health and at the same time find a way to see when to direct an individual towards NHS psychological support and a relevant healthcare professional.

Bridging the gap

The solution can also “bridge the gap” in the period between the patient’s regular face-to-face consultations. People can use their phones to engage with the artificial intelligence-driven solution by having a conversational flow approach that could help offset any initial worries they may have.

“With AI, we believe it is possible to create solutions that could mimic a human interaction to some degree,” adds Bonnett. “This is not about replacing a psychologist, but about giving people more touchpoints outside an intervention and giving it to them when they need it.”

He says the aim is to be proactive rather than reactive and endeavouring to take preventive action before a situation escalates.



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