



# SMOKING CESSATION IN PRIMARY CARE

A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY OF PRIMARY CARE HEALTH  
PRACTITIONERS IN THE UK AND THE USE OF VERY BRIEF  
ADVICE

**MARCH 2019**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

Smoking is still the single biggest cause of preventable illness, cancer, and avoidable death in the UK<sup>(1)</sup>, placing an enormous burden and cost on the UK's health service. Alongside national and local governments, the health service has a vital role in providing evidence-based support to help existing smokers to quit.

It is important that smokers are offered treatment to quit in both primary and secondary care settings. In the secondary care setting, evidence-based models that routinely provide treatment to smokers admitted to hospital are already being rolled out. NHS England has committed to implementing this model in secondary care and mental health trusts in England by 2023/24<sup>(2)</sup>, which could achieve net savings between £30-60m after just one year<sup>(3)</sup>.

However, primary care remains a crucial part of the prevention pathway and will typically reach a larger number of generally healthier and younger smokers. Cost-effective, proven smoking cessation interventions can be delivered simply and quickly through primary care to help reduce the number of people smoking in the UK.

Primary care health practitioners often have limited time to deliver comprehensive smoking cessation support during consultations. NICE guidance recommends that primary care health practitioners deliver Very Brief Advice (VBA) to patients that smoke, which takes less than 30 seconds<sup>(4)</sup>. VBA uses the 'AAA' framework<sup>(5)</sup> where practitioners:

- **Ask** their patient about smoking to establish their smoking status, and record;
- **Advise** their patients on how they can stop smoking; and
- **Act** by offering help to support them to quit. This includes referring patients to stop smoking services (SSS) or prescribing pharmacotherapy with brief advice.

## KEY FINDINGS

**PRIMARY CARE HEALTH PRACTITIONERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO DELIVER VBA IF THEY ARE AWARE OF LOCAL STOP SMOKING SERVICES**

### Completing very brief advice (VBA) for smoking cessation

Around half of primary care practitioners frequently complete VBA with patients



Despite NICE guidelines recommending universal use in primary care settings, around half (53%) of health practitioners reported frequently completing VBA.

When examining VBA steps individually (that is, examining reported frequency of each step occurring in isolation of the previous step), health practitioners often ask their patients about their smoking (84%) and advise patients on how to quit (87%). However, fewer health practitioners reported frequently taking action to support their patients to quit (64%).

These findings could reflect the declining availability of community SSS and reports that some commissioners are withdrawing pharmacotherapy for smoking cessation from their formularies. Both of these may limit health practitioners' ability to act and therefore complete VBA fully during consultations.

Completion of VBA is also linked to health practitioner awareness of local SSS in their area. Health practitioners are around twice as likely to refer if they are aware of local SSS or they agree that they are sufficient in their area. This illustrates the importance of raising awareness of local SSS among health practitioners when and where they are available.

### LOW REPORTED PRESCRIPTION OF PHARMACOTHERAPY AND RECOMMENDATION OF E-CIGARETTES FOR SMOKING CESSATION

When combined with behavioural support, there is good evidence for the use of both pharmacotherapy and e-cigarettes in supporting smokers to quit. However, the number of health practitioners who reported frequently prescribing pharmacotherapy for patients who smoke is relatively low, with 22% prescribing nicotine replacement therapy, 16% prescribing varenicline and 4% prescribing bupropion.

NICE guidance recommends health practitioners provide smokers interested in using an e-cigarette to quit smoking with information and advice<sup>(4)</sup>. However, only 1 in 4 (27%) health practitioners reported frequently providing patients with advice about e-cigarettes as a tool to quit.

### REFERRAL TO STOP SMOKING SERVICES IS VARIABLE ACROSS THE UK

There is geographical variation in the action taken by health practitioners for referring patients to SSS. In England and Northern Ireland, health practitioners most frequently refer to in-house SSS, whilst in Wales and Scotland, referral to external SSS in the community (commonly pharmacy or specialist services) is most common.

This may in part reflect inherent differences in how local public health and primary care services are delivered across the UK. Since the transfer of public health responsibilities from the NHS to local authorities in England in 2013, referral pathways from primary care to local SSS appear to not be as strong as in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where the health service retains responsibility for services.

### PRIMARY CARE HEALTH PRACTITIONERS REPORT THAT AN OVERLOADED HEALTH SYSTEM, LACK OF SUITABLE SERVICES, AND INSUFFICIENT TRAINING PREVENT THEM FROM DOING MORE

Patients having too many issues to address in a consultation was the most frequently reported barrier (59%) for health practitioners initiating conversations about smoking cessation with patients, and was more pronounced for GPs compared to nurses, with nearly three quarters (72%) citing this factor.

Some 40% reported that they perceived that patients were unreceptive to smoking cessation advice and around 15% were concerned about negative patient reactions. Additional barriers reported were the perception that other health care practitioners are

responsible for this type of intervention (15%) and the lack of referral options (15%).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the report findings, Cancer Research UK has several recommendations.

### Primary care service commissioners and planners across the UK should:

- Prioritise smoking cessation and tobacco control in regional plans.
- In England, work with local authorities to ensure shared understanding of tobacco control responsibilities, seamless referrals to local SSS, and availability of pharmacotherapies to all smokers.
- Signpost to and/or provide all primary care health practitioners with training in the delivery of VBA.
- Ensure pharmacotherapy for smoking cessation is available on prescription and encourage primary care health practitioners to prescribe pharmacotherapy with brief advice for smoking cessation.
- Support the use of e-cigarettes as an aid to stop smoking, recommending that they can also be used alongside behavioural support.

### Primary care health practitioners across the UK should:

- Complete training in VBA and employ this tool to initiate conversations with all patients about stopping smoking.
- Be aware of treatment options available to patients in their local area, including prescribing pharmacotherapy or referring patients to SSS in their practice or community.
- Support the use of e-cigarettes as an aid to stop smoking, recommending they can also be used alongside behavioural support.

### Barriers to initiating conversations about smoking cessation in primary care



Overloaded health system



Lack of suitable services



Insufficient training

In England, to ensure that smokers can access support in all parts of our public health system, smoking cessation support in the NHS should be delivered alongside and in partnership with local authority smoking cessation services in the community. The UK Government must provide local authorities with sufficient funding for these services. A “polluter pays” approach should be adopted so that the tobacco industry makes a greater contribution to the healthcare costs caused by smoking, via a Tobacco Industry Levy.

## METHODOLOGY

Cancer Research UK conducted a cross-sectional survey of primary care health practitioners to explore the factors that impact the delivery of smoking cessation interventions across the UK. The online survey of General Practitioners and Practice Nurses, delivered between January and March 2017, aimed to better understand the type of smoking cessation advice reported by primary care health practitioners, their awareness of smoking cessation services in their local area and their perceived barriers to referring patients to these services.

## REFERENCES

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## AUTHORS

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## CANCER RESEARCH UK

Cancer Research UK is the world’s largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. We support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2017/2018, we spent £423 million on research institutes, hospitals and universities across the UK. We receive no funding from Government for our research.

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