SPECIAL FEATURE

Healthcare for the homeless: Nishkam SWAT

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Homeless people are among some of the most ostracised in society and face many barriers when it comes to accessing even the basic aspects of healthcare. The average homeless person in the UK is only likely to make it to their mid-40s.¹

Some dentists, alongside other healthcare professionals, are working to take care of homeless people on the streets and give them a chance at a better life.

Only metres from the prestigious Savoy Hotel, homeless people gather to receive food, clothing and healthcare from the charity Nishkam SWAT. This charity is founded on strong principles including to 'serve humanity as one' and provides free meals to all, regardless of their faith, gender, ethnicity or age.

Although initially set up as a service to provide free food, the volunteers soon identified a need for medical attention as well. Funds were gathered and the charity purchased an ambulance van in 2017. Now in its third successful year, the service is run solely through the hard work of volunteers from all NHS backgrounds including pharmacists, dentists, medics and nurses working in full time NHS roles.

On a small budget of £100–£200 per month, made up entirely from donations, Nishkam SWAT purchases medication, blankets and first

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aid, and makes hygiene packs to provide to the homeless. For many, this is the only source of healthcare they have access to.

Dental services are among the most difficult services to gain access to and dental problems are a prominent issue affecting quality of life.² While Nishkam SWAT is unable to provide invasive dental treatment, the dentists on board spend time understanding their clients' issues, providing prevention advice, triaging any urgent dental emergencies, arranging appropriate onward care and following up to ensure a seamless pathway of care.

Several of the dentists are working in roles within maxillofacial departments in hospital and so are used to dealing with facial swellings secondary to dental abscesses or facial trauma. Having a multidisciplinary team of volunteers is what makes the charity thrive and be effective in achieving its goals of improving access to healthcare for the homeless. A

number of clients state that they are unable to find a dentist that will take them on or are being discharged from hospital onto the streets without medication.³ It is here that Nishkam SWAT are making a difference, in bridging the gap between homelessness and access to NHS services. Even during the current pandemic, the service did not stop. The appropriate PPE was arranged and volunteers underwent further training so that efforts to serve the community could continue.

As a volunteer, there is much to be gained from the selfless service for others demonstrated here. Some of the volunteers fed back that their role required leadership skills they did not know they had. From arranging budgets for the healthcare service to managing clients in pain and triaging urgent consultations, having a passionate team centred around patients' best interests is what makes the role so rewarding and enjoyable. Some of the volunteers are recently qualified and feel the extra time spent serving in the community better equips them with the necessary communication skills to manage patients from all backgrounds and cultures. No matter what skills a volunteer is looking to improve or take from the experience, the charity works with them to ensure a fulfilling and enriching experience. ■

If you would like to get involved, please get in touch at info@nishkamswat.org and request the healthcare team. @NishkamSWAT

References

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2. Shelter. 280,000 people in England are homeless, with thousands more at risk. 18 December 2019. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/articles/280,000_people_in_england_are_homeless,_with_thousands_more_at_risk (accessed August 2020).
3. Cream J, Fenney D, Williams E, Baylis A, Dahir S, Wyatt H. *Delivering health and care for people who sleep rough. Going above and beyond*. The King's Fund, February 2020. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-02/Delivering-health-care-people-sleep-rough.pdf> (accessed August 2020).