

National Exercise Referral Scheme



Research Team

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The Study

It is widely recognised that physical activity confers a number of health benefits; prime among them is a reduced risk from chronic disease such as coronary heart disease (CHD) and depression/anxiety. Summaries of research highlight an almost 50% reduction in CHD related mortality for more active individuals (DOH, 2004). Increased levels of physical activity are associated with lowering diastolic and systolic blood pressure and with lower risk of stroke. Physical activity is also positively associated with the production of HDL cholesterol. Whilst reviews of available evidence have also concluded that exercise is positively linked with mental health (Callaghan, 2003) and to be effective in treating symptoms of depression (MERC, 2005).

Exercise referral schemes (ERS) have become increasingly popular as a way of addressing CHD risk and mental health issues. In the primary care context, it has been argued that there is both the contact opportunity and the availability of credible sources of health advice to influence health behaviours (Graham et al, 2005). However, it has been stated that "there is no review level of evidence of effectiveness of exercise referral schemes" (Hillsdon et al, 2004:9) and the majority of reported studies are US based with limited applicability to the Welsh and UK context. In addition, recent NICE guidance states that "practitioners, policy makers and commissioners should only endorse exercise referral schemes...that are part of a properly designed and controlled research study to determine effectiveness" (2006).

It is against this background, that a review of the available evidence and an examination of current policy and practice are being undertaken in Wales. The development of national standards and protocol and the rigorous evaluation of a major policy initiative represent an exciting opportunity to add to a developing evidence base in public health improvement and to contribute to the development of Health Challenge Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government is seeking to invest over £4 million over the next three years to support the evaluation and development of exercise referral schemes in Wales. This investment seeks to determine the effectiveness of exercise referral in improving health and increasing physical activity levels, to look at health economic measures and support existing schemes across Wales who may otherwise have to stop due to current short term funding arrangements.

CISHE recently won the tender from the Welsh Assembly Government to perform an independent evaluation of this national exercise referral scheme (NERS). The evaluation is being conducted in collaboration with the following partners:

- General Practices, North Wales Clinical School, Cardiff University,
- Centre for Economics and Policy in Health, Bangor University
- Sport, Health and Exercise Sciences, Bangor University
- Department of Exercise and Health Sciences, Bristol University

The aim of the project is to determine the effectiveness of the NERS as it is rolled out in 13 implementation areas using a randomised control trial design over the next two years. The provisional study design involves a period of piloting outcome measures and developing protocols followed by general practice recruitment in partnership with each area's exercise co-ordinators. Participants (n = ~2400) will be randomised to either a treatment or control group and will complete

baseline, 6 month, and 12 month follow-up measures. A detailed process evaluation will also be conducted throughout the trial.

The first six schemes should be up and running in May-June 2007. These will be operating in Neath, Blaenau Gwent, Cardiff, Swansea, Bridgend and Conwy. After this, a further seven areas look to join the national exercise referral scheme by winter 2007 and the remaining LHBs by winter 2008.

CISHE is very pleased to be a contributing member to a project of such national importance and we look forward to collaborating with all involved parties to make this a success. For further information on the National Exercise Referral Scheme, visit the [Welsh Assembly Government's website](#)

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