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Citation:

Pringle, A (2014) Community nurses can encourage men to look after their health. *Journal of Community Nursing*, 28 (4). 16 - ?. ISSN 0263-4465

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Dear Editor,

Comment- The lifestyle time bomb: The role of nurses in community health improvement

We write in response to your editorial [1] on the 'ticking public health time bomb' and the role of nurses in tackling unhealthy lifestyles. Our research investigated the effect of prestigious professional football clubs in delivering health improvement for hard-to-reach men [2]. Premier League Health (PLH) was a national programme of men's health improvement delivered in 16 professional football clubs [2]. Men attended weekly physical activity and health education sessions located and delivered by health trainers (HTs) employed by 16 professional football clubs [2].

Importantly, the lifestyles reported by the men [2] confirmed that they were living exemplars of the time bombs that Beckford-Ball [1] wrote about; their lifestyles corresponded with the toxic cocktails that brew and incubate to blight so many men's lives, even as early as their late twenty's [3]. In PLH some of the HTs were nurses with a background in health promotion and behaviour change. In post-intervention interviews with participants, recruits regularly identified the importance of health professionals, especially the practice nurses, in encouraging them to take the first steps toward engagement [2].

This encouragement was vital to these men; many were so poorly connected to existing health services [2, 4] that they would rarely come across any services designed to meet their needs, let alone new ones. Indeed, one third of our recruits never attended their GP and over half never used health advice services [2]. Pointing to the link between low health literacy and low literacy, few of our recruits found out about PLH by written means [4]. They learned about, and worked out whether or not it was safe and to be trusted, through word-of-mouth, including family members. A crucial link in the success of PLH was some of these family members had learned about the programme from community/health professionals [5], including practice nurses.

While at the programme, HTs not only provided information about PLH, but also they were able to describe it in ways that provided the necessary reassurances about safety [2, 5]. The men often had substantial apprehensions about the programme; even the idea of playing sport conjured up notions that were genuinely frightening to men who had not been active in a long time; in some cases since their school days. [2] Others were frightened about not 'fitting in' with others and with the idea of meeting and interacting with strangers. [2] Yet, HTs recruited around 4000 into the PLH evaluation; to our HTs, 'hard-to-reach' really only meant *unreached*, and they knew how to sort that [2].

Participants also described how the positive 'tone' of the practical sessions was so important to them. [2] HTs delivered many of these sessions and in some cases, these were supplemented with activities delivered by nurse specialists. In the preparation sessions that we delivered to support the HTs to implement the programme [2], we were at pains to emphasise the importance of positive emotional experiences for encouraging attendance. HTs quickly grasped the importance of every single attendance and took the opportunity to encourage the men just for turning up. Others hooked on to the idea that allowing potential recruits to come along 'just to look' was important for providing reassurance. In one club, onlookers were encouraged to join in 'for a few minutes'; these tester experiences were important for building confidence that was lacking in some men. Still others

recognised the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations and typically ended their sessions with the epithet; 'Tell your mates'.

In our research, health professionals, including nurses provided vital advice and guidance on lifestyle issues, along with information and encouragement to take up the opportunities for health improvement provided through the football clubs [2]. They provided an essential 'human touch' that was very meaningful to the many men we recruited who were often missing that experience. As such, nurses' were important armoury in diffusing the 'ticking public health time bomb' that these men had primed.

References:

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You can find out more about the outcomes of the research at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FPzGuQ4tos>

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