

## Research shows that early intervention works

An experimental specialist service, open extended hours and able to meet all the needs of its clients under one roof, has been proven to help people return to work and study more easily after their first psychotic episode. LEO (Lambeth Early Onset Team) was set up in south London at the beginning of 2000 to see if a specially trained multidisciplinary team offering a single point of access to people when they first became ill would make a long-term difference to how they fared.

The research trial showed that after 18 months, the people referred to LEO were more likely to have returned to work or study than their counterparts who were offered conventional mental health services from community mental health teams covering a specific geographical area. The people referred to LEO were also more likely to have maintained or rebuilt good relationships with families and friends, and more likely to be taking their medication regularly. They were more likely to be keeping in touch with mental health workers and less likely to be in hospital.

The average age of the 144 people who took part in the study – most of them male and single – was 26 and reflected national statistics of people having their first episode of psychosis. More than half of them were from a minority ethnic group, predominantly from African or Caribbean families.

When the research was conducted, LEO consisted of a team leader, a part-time consultant, a trainee psychiatrist, a half-time clinical psychologist, four community psychiatric nurses, an occupational therapist and two health care assistants. The community-based team offered a mix of medication, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, vocational advice and support, and work with families, all tailored to the individual patient.

The therapies and work programmes were specially adapted for people with early psychosis and staff who were recruited had an interest in working with younger people. A family and carers' support group was set up – and a social activity programme open to everyone referred to LEO.

The emphasis was on quality of life as much as improvement of symptoms: LEO aimed to meet all the mental health and social welfare needs of the people on its books who could access the services there from 8am to 8pm during the week and from 9am to 5pm on weekends and public holidays.

'When people have their first episode of psychosis, they often respond well to initial treatment but frequently relapse,' said Professor Tom Craig who at the Institute of Psychiatry. 'Previous studies have shown the importance of employment in helping long-term recovery and the beneficial role of social relationships.'

'Even though there was no significant difference in symptoms between the two groups, our service users reported a better quality of life and greater satisfaction with LEO than with generic community mental health teams.'

As a result of the research, the service offered by LEO, run by South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, has continued and expanded.

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