

GUIDELINES TO TACKLE THE FEELING OF LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN THE ELDERLY: AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH BY BELGIAN RED CROSS-FLANDERS

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BACKGROUND

Loneliness and social isolation are growing problems amongst the elderly in Belgium. The feeling of loneliness in older people is mostly due to the loss of friends and family, mobility or income and has an impact on quality of life and well-being. The Social Services of Belgian Red-Cross Flanders are working on tackling these problems by sending volunteers on house visits to lonely older people (the 'Just Pop In' project).

AIM

In this project, we aimed to develop evidence-based guidelines which form the basis for a new, effective approach to the 'Just Pop In' project and to create a framework for the implementation of these evidence-based guidelines.

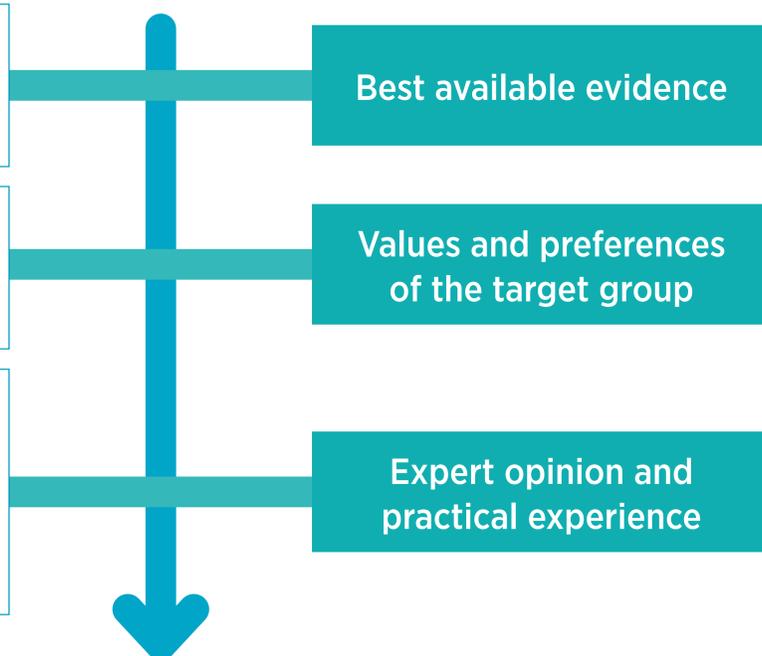
METHOD

- 1) Systematic literature search: Electronic database searches were performed through MEDLINE, The Cochrane Library, The Campbell Library, Embase, Social Sciences Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, PsychINFO and Movisie (from date of inception to March 2012) to identify studies on the effect of volunteer visits to lonely older people.
- 2) Guideline development: a guideline panel (composed of academic experts in the field of social sciences and individuals with practical experience) discussed the collected evidence and exchanged opinions and visions (informal consensus method), in order to create a set of evidence-based recommendations.
- 3) Implementation: a framework for implementation was established by the Social Services of Belgian Red-Cross-Flanders.



RESULTS

- ✓ Five experimental studies^{abcde}, using small populations (n<100), met the methodological criteria. The overall quality of the body of evidence was low (GRADE methodology). There is limited evidence on the effect of a visit by a volunteer on feelings of loneliness in older people.
- ✓ The Social Service of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders indicated that:
 - lonely older people appreciate regularity in the visits and care about continuity of the visits by the same volunteer;
 - volunteers prefer biweekly short visits (1-2h).
- ✓ Expert panel: Leen Heylen (Flemish research and knowledge centre of the 3rd age, Thomas More), Astrid Gepts (OCMW Home care), Veronique Wetzels (Community of Sant'Egidio), Johan Tourné (CM Home care), Luc Beckaert (Belgian Red Cross-Flanders - volunteer)
- ✓ The panel formulated a set of recommendations once they reached consensus, and provided advice for implementation.



EVIDENCE-BASED GUIDELINES

- ✓ Guidelines were developed for tackling loneliness amongst the elderly based on the principles of evidence-based practice. The following guideline was formulated in the context of 'frequency of visits': *"Ensure the regularity and continuity of volunteer visits to the elderly person. Try to arrange a fixed time that the elderly person can look forward to. This creates an atmosphere of trust."*
- ✓ The panel recommended strong partnership arrangements between organisations for optimal implementation of the guidelines.
- ✓ The Social Services of Belgian Red Cross-Flanders distribute flyers to volunteers, local Red Cross branches, have contact with partner organisations, give information sessions and post information on websites to start up the implementation of the guidelines.

CONCLUSION

Evidence-based guidelines were developed to tackle loneliness and social isolation in older people. The guidelines development for the 'Just Pop In' project lead to a clear demarcation of the tasks of 'Just Pop in' volunteers, which is now limited to providing emotional and relational support during visits. The project will be extended according to the formulated evidence-based practice guidelines. Local Red Cross branches need to cooperate with partner organisations to ensure developed services can be sustained.