

We are pleased to publish the following interview with members of the Croydon Aztec Project which is using telecare for people with dementia.

We are sure you will have lots of questions, comments and ideas, but to protect the team from undue pressure from enquiries, please channel them through sonja.green@telecarealliance.co.uk

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What is the Croydon telecare scheme called, and who is it targeting?

The Croydon scheme for using electronic technology and telecare is called the Assistive Technology Project for people with dementia and their carers. This pilot project, known locally as the Aztec Project, was joint funded by Croydon Social Services and SLAM (the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust), and is led by the Head Occupational Therapist (OT) in the Mental Health for Older Adults Team, with a co-ordinator from the voluntary sector.

The scheme targets older people with dementia and their carers, providing specific packages of care including telecare and other 'stand alone' electronic equipment, to enable people to remain at home who would otherwise need hospital admission or placement in residential care.

A small amount of funding was also provided by Social Services and the Croydon Primary Care Trust for the establishment of an equipment display and demonstration facility, called the Aztec Centre, based at the integrated Croydon Community Equipment Service premises.

The centre is available at the present time (July 2005) for use by health and social care professionals in Croydon, and has on display working examples of telecare alarm sensors and other electronic technology equipment, alongside a wide range of community OT and sensory impairment equipment laid out in domestic settings. The Equipment Service also stores the telecare equipment, and their technical officers assist with minor adaptations to facilitate telecare installations.

Why was it decided to focus on older people with dementia?

The Head OT at SLAM had been keen to use telecare to support people at home with mental health problems for a number of years, and saw the potential for its use for older people with dementia. The carers and families were often desperately in need of support and the technology was becoming more widely available.

In these often complex cases, each installation package is bespoke and is based on a thorough and detailed specialist assessment. The benefits for those involved, however, are likely to be significant, e.g. people can remain in a familiar environment, maintaining their independence, and the technology can reduce carer stress.

How are potential clients referred ?

At the present time, all clients are referred from the integrated Mental Health of Older Adults Service. It is planned to expand the project over the next two years for all care groups, and to train personnel in multi-agency health and social care teams to enable them to recognise the potential for using telecare and electronic technology equipment.

How are people's needs assessed?

Clients and their carers are referred for detailed specialist assessment to identify the potential for using telecare and electronic equipment solutions to mental health problems. People selected have identified risk factors which can be managed by using this technology.

The assessment looks at many issues and alternative solutions, including multi-faceted support packages and equipment options. The management of risk is of particular importance especially when the client is living alone at home, or where the client is also a carer.

How do you know when needs change?

Each case is monitored closely at different stages, and the level of OT and response services support is generally high. Feedback from the telecare sensors provides ongoing monitoring information for evaluation and analysis, which alerts the teams to changing needs.

People with dementia can lose skills suddenly and it is imperative to remain in contact, and additional equipment and sensors can be added to existing systems if required - as technology advances more specialist sensors will become available to meet different needs. In addition, this early telecare project has been involved directly with product testing and development.

What do the users, carers and staff think about the scheme?

The project team won a SLAM Clinical Governance award last year, and the scheme has used data collected over the first twelve months of the pilot to demonstrate its efficiency and cost benefits. Working within existing resources has been exhausting for the staff

involved, but they are pleased with what they have achieved and the project has been a considerable success.

Feedback from carers has been particularly enthusiastic as telecare systems can allow family members more personal freedom from worry and the need to supervise at all times.

Clients have been enabled to remain at home in their own familiar surroundings and maintain their independence. Telecare systems and electronic technology equipment can be un-noticed by the person for whom they are installed as they are passive, i.e. triggered by automatic sensors rather than needing to be operated manually.

How would you like the scheme to develop in the future?

It is hoped that the project will become mainstream for all care groups using investment from the Preventative Technology Grant, which will help to fund additional equipment and systems, staff training and development, and installation and maintenance costs.

It is also planned to open the Aztec Centre to the public as an Independent Living Centre, with an occupational therapist available to give information and advice on all community equipment, and who will be able to demonstrate the telecare and electronic technology equipment on display.