

## PRESS RELEASE

### **Social prescribing – supporting people’s health and wellbeing through community connection**

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Europe-wide research program on social prescribing launched

**When doctors issue prescriptions, patients usually head to the pharmacy or make an appointment with a therapist. This isn’t the case, however, with social prescribing. The aim of this new approach, developed in the United Kingdom, is to bridge the gap between primary healthcare and non-medical support services. Led by Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, 22 European healthcare and research facilities will now examine the effects of social prescribing in a five-year project, focusing in particular on vulnerable communities. The European Commission has awarded €6.9 million to support this research.**

Pathogens aren’t the only cause of illness: stress and social burdens can also make people unwell. Social prescribing has been developed in response to such situations. This concept aims to make it easier for people to access wide-ranging support services. Doctors refer patients to trained specialists called “link workers”, who engage with patients, get to know them, and help them to access groups, activities and social services in their community.

If a patient is suffering from loneliness, for example, they might receive support in attending an art course or a running group, where they can meet other people and enjoy positive experiences. Alternatively, a patient suffering from insomnia as a result of mounting debts could receive assistance with navigating the welfare system or accessing debt advice services.

So, could social prescribing help patients make better use of local services to improve their lives? And could it support health and well-being, especially for patients in vulnerable communities? Researchers across Europe hope to find answers to these questions in the years ahead.

“Social prescribing is an innovative concept to guide people with social problems away from primary healthcare and towards local services,” explains Prof. Wolfram Herrmann, who is heading up the Social Prescribing-EU (SP-EU) project. “To date, this approach has not been specifically tailored to the needs of particularly vulnerable communities. With this in mind, we’re focusing in particular on people who live alone, LGBTIQ people, refugees and first-generation immigrants to examine the efficacy of this approach.” The project includes a comparative study of social prescribing across eight countries. In addition, qualitative analysis will be conducted in five countries to identify success factors and barriers to accessing services.

## First practices in Germany adopt social prescribing

While social prescribing is already integrated into primary care in the UK, it remains relatively unknown in Germany. A model project was launched last year, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and led by Charité. MVZ Zerbaum und Kollegen, a doctor's practice in Brandenburg an der Havel, is among those participating in the project. "At the grassroots level, we repeatedly encounter people who could benefit from social prescribing," says Dr. Benjamin Senst. "While people come to us with physical complaints, the causes are often associated with housing problems, financial worries, difficulties at work, relationship troubles or alcohol abuse."

A link worker visits the model project at the Zerbaum practice once per week, providing targeted referrals to local advice centers, social support services, associations and withdrawal treatment services. "There are a lot of support services that people often don't know about or struggle to access on their own," says Dr. Senst. "We can't help everyone. It's particularly difficult for people who have not participated in social life for a number of years. However, we've also enjoyed success: for example, we were able to refer a patient with a severe stress disorder to a stress management course covered by his health insurance. He's healthy now and back in full-time work."

A whole range of non-medical factors can negatively impact a person's health. Social prescribing is a highly promising approach to remedy this. If the Social Prescribing-EU (SP-EU) project confirms its potential, this approach could help to transform healthcare systems across Europe. Social prescribing is already a core element of primary care in England, with over 3,500 link workers providing these services.

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Dr. Benjamin Senst, a general practitioner in Brandenburg an der Havel, is taking part in a model project on social prescribing

**Links:**

Institute of General Practice and Family Medicine

<https://allgemeinmedizin.charite.de/en/>

Hausarztpraxis Zerbaum

<https://www.hausarzt-zerbaum.de/>

National Academy for Social Prescribing

<https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/>

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[social-prescribing.eu](https://social-prescribing.eu)



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