

SEXUAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN ACTION

The Primary Health Care for Traveller Project Breaking Barriers

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Both Aoife and Mary Bridget completed *The Foundation Programme in Sexual Health Promotion (FPSHP)* from April – June 2016. This was a very positive step forward for the promotion of sexual health within Traveller communities.

The Pavee Point Primary Health Care for Travellers Project (PHCTP) was established in 1994. The work of the project is based on outreach work in the community with Traveller families, by Traveller Community Health Workers. The ethos, “nothing about us, without us” is foundational to Pavee Point’s work. This ensures that the Traveller Community Health Workers’ experience and understanding of the needs and concerns in their community is extensive, with 83% of the Travellers interviewed in the *All Ireland Traveller Health Study 2010*¹ (AITHS) stating they received their health information and advice from the PHCTP and from Traveller organisations. The study also found that PHCTPs were the second most important source of health information for Travellers in Ireland after GPs. It is therefore very important and valuable that PHCTPs were and continue to be, included in the programme.

The AITHS study showed an increase in service uptake when Traveller Community Health Workers were able to link between health services and Travellers in the community, this is apparent in the higher rate of participation of Traveller women in screening programmes compared with the general population (25% of Traveller women compared to 13% of general population had a breast screening and 23% of the Travellers had smear test compared to 12% of general population).

Travellers face many barriers when accessing sexual health services. Lack of access to education and information about sexual health impede access and engagement with sexual health services. Poor levels of literacy and language skills further complicate accessing vital sexual health information. Experiences of racism and discrimination have an impact on how Travellers access services and the stage at which they are accessed². As shown in the AITHS research, the level of complete trust by Travellers in health professionals was only 41%, this compares with a trust level of 82% by the general population in health professionals. These experiences also negatively impact Travellers’ ability to engage fully with sexual health services. Sub groups, such as LGBTQ Travellers, can face even further barriers in accessing services as a result of stigmatisation and discrimination based on their ethnicity as well as their sexuality and/or gender identity.

Recognising the barriers that Travellers face when discussing relationships and sexuality, Pavee Point published *A Pavee Perspective - Travellers’ Attitudes to Sexual Relationships and Sex education*³ in 2011 along with an accompanying *Relationships & Sexuality Toolkit – An Education Pack for Working with Young Travellers*⁴. The research highlights the importance of providing sexual education in a way that is sensitive to Traveller cultural identity and stresses the importance of tackling taboos, while the toolkit provides a framework for exploring topics and themes identified as crucial in relationships and sexuality education. Building on this previous work, Pavee Point was eager to participate in the FPSHP.

The FPSHP is an intensive, dynamic and innovative programme which provides modules on Sexual Health Promotion in the Irish Context; Understanding Diversity; and Facilitation Skills and Methodologies for Sexual Health Promotion. These aspects of the programme were very useful for the Coordinators and not only promoted a greater understanding of sexual health issues but also provided opportunities for skills building and knowledge exchange. Following the completion of the programme, Pavee Point’s PHCTP have begun to roll out sexual health awareness workshops with Community Health Workers. Mary Brigid Collins, Primary Health Care Assistant Coordinator in Pavee Point said: “We want to remove the stigma associated with sexual health among Travellers and promote a more positive attitude to sexual health. We need to ensure that everyone has access to appropriate sexual health education and information and that Travellers do not get excluded.”

An integral aspect of the Community Health Workers’ role is to work with service providers to ensure that their service is Traveller inclusive and culturally appropriate. Pavee Point are excited to continue to work with facilitators of the FPSHP to ensure the material and course content is accessible and Traveller inclusive and that there is an increase of Traveller participants going forward.



¹ All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team (2010). *All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Summary of Findings*. Dublin: School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science, University College Dublin.

² Health Service Executive (2008). *National Intercultural Health Strategy 2007-2012*. Dublin: Health Service Executive.

³ McGaughey, Fiona (2011). *A Pavee Perspective - Travellers’ Attitudes to Sexual Relationships and Sex education*. Dublin: Pavee Point and HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme.

⁴ Pavee Point (2011). *Relationships & Sexuality Toolkit – An Education Pack for Working with Young Travellers*. Dublin: Pavee Point.