

The role of care navigators in primary care: A realist review

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When people go to see their GP, they often tell the doctor about problems related to things like housing, loneliness, debt that are affecting their health and well-being. Care navigators work with people to address such non-medical needs. They do this by talking to the person who has been referred (by a health professional or they may have self-referred), to understand their situation and concerns. Then, together, this individual and the care navigator develop an action plan and decide on local groups and activities that could help with non-medical issues (e.g. organisations that support people with financial concerns, charities that run befriending services).

There are a number of uncertainties associated with how care navigators function; who do they help, how, why and in what circumstances? Our research is seeking to address these questions by undertaking a particular type of review – called a realist synthesis. This type of review does not make judgments about whether an intervention works or not; instead, it explores why it may work in particular circumstances by looking at how the intervention (e.g. care navigation) changes the context to activate certain mechanisms within an individual to bring about specific outcomes. We anticipate that our findings will enable providers to tailor how care navigation is delivered so it can be useful in specific circumstances. It will also help to explain why a service that looks the same may not work in all settings, with all individuals.