

All things being equal?



A lot done, a lot to do. That message was the title of the final report of the Commission for Racial Equality and was taken up as the key message for a landmark conference looking at best practice in health and race quality.

'Five Years On – A Scottish Showcase on Race Equality and Health' demonstrated how NHS Boards are making significant progress at strategic level in tackling inequalities experienced by black and ethnic minority people across Scotland. However, it also highlighted several challenges.

"Equality in health cannot be achieved by treating everyone the same," says Eleanor McKnight, Head of the National Resource Centre for Ethnic Minority Health (NRCEMH), which organised the conference. "We need to get better at looking at black and ethnic minority groups as individuals and developing specific services to meet their rights, rather than simply using a colour blind approach," she says. "It's too easy to say 'we treat everybody the same, regardless of their race'. True race equality is perhaps more about treating everyone differently."

The bigger picture

Recognising individual need was a key theme at the conference. This includes acknowledging the factors that can affect anyone – poverty, poor living conditions, low educational attainment – and those which lead to multiple discrimination faced by people from minority ethnic groups, including language difficulties, racism and poor understanding of cultural issues. Eleanor adds: "We

True equality in healthcare means recognising and respecting diversity. That was one of the key messages to emerge from a recent conference

need to see the bigger picture and the cultural impact of immigration and terrorism. A culturally competent health service must reflect the society it's part of and the diverse population it serves."

Conference workshops showcased how NHS Boards and local partnerships are leading the way. NHS Lanarkshire, North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council are working with spiritual leaders in promoting better mental health for Muslim men. Discussion groups were held in the Lanarkshire Mosque to help understand the impact of racist incidents. Findings from this process will inform future community development.

Another workshop focused on NRCEMH's Gypsy/Traveller Awareness Training. Many factors contribute to the poor health of gypsy/travellers, including a nomadic lifestyle and substandard living conditions. The workshop highlighted an innovative development – Patient Hand Held Records that equip gypsy/travellers with a portable tool to record their medical history. Eleanor adds: "Feedback has been incredibly positive. This idea is very transferable and could be used amongst other marginalised groups – homeless people and temporary migrant communities for example."

The Cabinet Secretary, Ms Nicola Sturgeon launched an important agenda for NRCEMH, a performance assessment framework called

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Checking for Change, which will help Boards to demonstrate progress and turn strategy into results. NRCEMH is working with Fair for All colleagues in the other five equality initiatives to develop a generic framework as it prepares to join a new Directorate of Equalities and Planning in April 2008.

"We've come a long way towards bringing racism out of the closet but there's a long way to go," says Eleanor. "We need to ask black and ethnic minority individuals to tell us when there is progress, but also to tell us when we've got it wrong. And most importantly – we need to listen."

