The Carers’ Alert Thermometer (CAT): Identifying The Support Needs Of Family Carers Of People Living With MND (plwMND)

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Background

Burden and distress experienced by family carers of plwMND is well known and reported widely within the published literature¹. Evidence-based screening tools to help identify carers at risk of breakdown and plan appropriate support to meet carers’ needs are urgently needed.

The Carers’ Alert Thermometer (CAT) was developed in a study funded by the NIHR (2011-2014). It is a quick and easy-to-use alert tool designed to be completed collaboratively by carers and non-specialist health staff to identify the needs of carers of family members with cancer and advanced progressive illness in their last year of life.²

The CAT has 10 questions to identify the support needed by the carer to provide care and for the carer’s own health and well-being. A traffic light system indicates the level of need for each alert and a visual thermometer signifies the extent of the carer’s needs. There is a guidance section for alerts which can be tailored to local services and an action plan to complete with review dates. (www.edgehill.ac.uk/carers or scan for more details)

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Objectives

To modify the CAT and pilot it with family carers of plwMND to determine its usefulness in identifying their need for support.

Method

A workshop was held in Oct 2015 with 13 MND Association Visitors (AVs), Regional Care Development Advisers (RCDAs) and a Regional Development Manager (RDM) to review the CAT, provide training on its implementation and demonstrate resources including a DVD. The CAT was slightly modified to ensure its wording was appropriate for non-healthcare staff to use e.g. removing some patient information and replacing the term ‘risk’ with ‘need’.

Participants then trialed the CAT with family carers during routine appointments for a 3-4 month period. Feedback on the utility of the CAT was obtained through a self-completed online survey and telephone interviews. A second workshop was held in another region in July 2016 to extend the pilot based on the results.

Discussion and conclusions

Users found CAT a useful mechanism for raising the topic of carer needs and for mapping the changes to these over time, in a structured and easy to follow format. Specific needs elicited using the CAT have potential to be used as an evidence base for MNDA and for other H&SC agencies. Further study of specific needs of MND AVs in delivering the CAT would be beneficial.

References