

The Care Companion - Impact of an Interactive, Online Personalised Resource for Enhancing Carer Resilience, Well-Being and Sustainability: A Real World, Mixed Methods Study

Scientific Summary

Background: Growing numbers of older people, faced with over-stretched health and social care services, are increasingly dependent on informal care. The Care Act (2014) recognises the importance of providing carers with access to relevant information, guidance and support that is adaptive to their changing needs and circumstances. However, most carers still experience this as lacking. Care Companion is an online intervention, co-developed with carers to provide access to a broad range of personalised information: local and national resources relevant to the carer's individual needs, a journal and mood monitor. It was launched across Coventry and Warwickshire in 2018, and has been promoted to carers via general practice, community and social care teams, hospital trusts and voluntary sector organisations.

Original objectives: To investigate the implementation of Care Companion in terms of reach; uptake and promotion by health and social care providers and the voluntary sector; how use is associated with resilience and wellbeing; its utility; and its overall cost-effectiveness.

Methods: The research had a mixed-methods design that drew on the RE-AIM Framework to assess how Care Companion translates to a real-world setting. Planned data collection included:

- Routine data: from carers' use of the Care Companion website
- Surveys: validated carer-reported outcome and health economic measures completed at baseline and follow-up
- Interviews: with carers, and health and social care providers about their experience of the Care Companion and its impact on service usage

We recruited 14 general practices to invite people on their carers' registers to participate in the study. We analysed the quantitative data using descriptive statistics and the interview data thematically. PPI representatives were closely involved in all aspects of the study.

Key findings: Registration and repeated usage of Care Companion was substantially lower than anticipated, despite a wide range of awareness raising activities with relevant NHS and social care services, third sector organisations, community groups and social media. Only 64 carer surveys were completed; hence we were unable to undertake the planned research on outcomes and costs. Analysis of the interviews with carers (N=30) and stakeholders (N=13) related to six key themes that influence Care Companion registration and use. While many participants recognised Care Companion as a valuable resource, few saw it as being of immediate relevance to their personal circumstances. For some, concerns about isolation and lack of hands-on support were viewed as more pressing issues than the need for information.

Conclusions: A free-to-use online personalised information resource, such as Care Companion, has limited reach and adoption. It appears unlikely to offer significant benefit to carers if promoted in isolation. Whether greater take-up and use would occur with closer integration into the overall delivery of health and social care support for carers requires further investigation.