

Therapeutic Knitting Study Day – Report

The World's first conference on Therapeutic Knitting, 'Knitting to Facilitate Change' was held at Bath's Royal Scientific and Literary Institution on June 15th 2012. The event hosted by Professor Paul Dieppe of Exeter University and organised by Betsan Corkhill of Stitchlinks attracted a large amount of interest from across the UK and as far afield as Chile, USA, South Africa and Australia.

Sixty clinicians, academics, patient representatives and group facilitators enjoyed a packed day with many others requesting a copy of a post-conference manuscript. Delegates included an exciting mix of specialists in areas ranging from pain and mental health to dementia, MS, clinical and research psychologists, psychotherapists, Occupational Therapists (OT), nurses, physios, knitting and textile artists to experts in EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing Therapy used in the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress), EEG (Electroencephalogram – recording the brain's electrical activity) and fMRI (Functional MRI – an MRI procedure that measures brain activity).

Professor Dieppe welcomed everyone and outlined the aims of the day which were to –

- establish a core team of clinicians, academics and group facilitators interested in helping develop a network of Therapeutic Knitting groups and measure their outcomes
- gather a group of like-minded individuals interested in exploring low cost, sustainable alternatives to managing wellbeing, stress, social isolation and long-term medical conditions
- establish ideas for potential research
- formulate a basis for a communication network
- formulate an action plan.

Despite coming from such diverse backgrounds, it was noted that all those present shared a common goal – to facilitate a positive change in the people they encountered, be that a change in the course of an illness, lifestyle or their social support network.

It was also recognised that the current model of healthcare is unsustainable, particularly for long-term conditions, and that more research is needed to find ways of tapping into the body's own healing mechanisms.

These acknowledgements set the scene for a day which focused on the multi-dimensional benefits of knitting from the possible biological and physiological changes through to social and behavioural; the use of knitting as a creative tool to manage symptoms and emotions; the use of Therapeutic Knitting groups to tackle loneliness and isolation and how clinicians can use Therapeutic Knitting groups as a means of educating, supporting, monitoring and motivating people over the longer-term at low cost in way which doesn't focus on negative issues.

In a discussion on whether it was the activity or the group which was beneficial, a possible synergistic relationship was noted – the self-soothing knitting activity enables participation in a group; successful therapeutic groups; successful group therapy and actively engages people in the recovery / management process. In support of these comments, delegates heard how addicts could use knitting as a self-soothing tool for the management of

emotions, stress and anxiety to enable them to partake in group activity. In addition to the group benefits, the importance of having a portable 'take home' tool linked to the group, and of being able to change the 'context' of ill health was also stressed.

Moving on to more specialist health issues, delegates heard how Therapeutic Knitting is being used to manage the experience of pain from Betsan Corkhill; mental health from OT Grace Main; dementia from Psychologist Hilary Jones and Methodist Homes Resource Centre Manager, Teresa McNulty and addiction from Betsan Corkhill on behalf of Clinical Nurse Specialist Andy Falconer. Therapeutic Knitting groups promote purpose, creativity, success, reward and enjoyment, which is particularly important in individuals who have no experience of these in other aspects of their lives. They are also easily tailored to meet the specific needs and challenges of these different specialities at low cost.

Photographs were shown of a magnificent knitted garden created by the Creative Moments Community Craft Group based at Perry Common, a deprived area of Birmingham, UK. It was knitted for Gardeners' World Live at the NEC by the community knitting group, local residents, junior school and some patients from a local pain management programme – a highly successful, intergenerational community project which helped to integrate people from diverse backgrounds back into a community from which they had been previously isolated.

The afternoon session focussed on the structure of the proposed network of Therapeutic Knitting groups, measurement, evaluation and research potential. It was proposed that community groups be at the heart of the Stitchlinks network which will focus on tackling social isolation, loneliness and stress. Their aim would be to strengthen local communities to ameliorate wellness and positive living.

Linked to these groups will be groups based in GP surgeries and hospitals run by clinicians for people who need additional support. The network will also include speciality groups for particular conditions such as pain, addiction, dementia and mental health where specific education and treatment can take place through the groups. These groups will provide GPs and other clinicians with options for early intervention in a community environment. Group members and facilitators will be supported through an online communication network and the Stitchlinks website.

Findings of an international survey of over 3,500 knitters carried out by Stitchlinks and Cardiff University were reported on by Research OT, Dr Jill Riley whilst Professor Paul Dieppe discussed the question of establishing an evidence base for such a complex intervention. This poses significant challenges in terms of the complexity of the intervention and gaining funding for what is seen as a 'non scientific' approach whilst at the same time recognising the dangers of 'medicalising', and thereby changing, the nature of the intervention. It was also recognised that obtaining funding for a knitting study has been difficult simply because of the word 'knitting' and the particular connotations it evokes. This discussion was taken further in the 'Research' workshop run by Reader in Pain, Ann Taylor from Cardiff University.

Other workshops discussed the 'Setting up of a Therapeutic Knitting Group'; 'Setting up a Network of Groups and Communication Pathways' plus an 'Evaluation and Dissemination' group which looked at who needs to be convinced and what evidence we need to

convince them. These were lead by Nurse Practitioner Carol Davidson, Change Management Consultant Steve Corkhill and Research OT, Dr Jill Riley.

The day closed with feedback from workshop facilitators and the formulation of an action plan for the network and research ideas lead by Professor Dieppe.

Outside the main lecture area, exhibits included a series of remarkable posters entitled Pictures of Pain (fresh from the Neurodynamics and Neuromatrix Conference in Adelaide, Australia) by Communication Artist, Molly Van der Weij and a range of knitted walking stick cosies provided by Dr Felicity Ford.

OT Grace Main said, "The level of energy in the room to try and put this on an evidence-based foundation was inspiring."

Group facilitator for Age Concern, Natalie McCulloch said, "It was a wonderful and motivating experience which I feel privileged to be part of."

Leisa Grey, Community Development Manager for Manchester Art Gallery said, "Thanks for a wonderfully stimulating, informative and inspiring day. It was the best conference I've been to for ages!"

Within a week of the conference the communication network was up and running and many of those who attended were already actively engaged in making things happen which is really exciting and refreshing.

A manuscript of the day's talks and proceedings will be available in pdf format by September 2012. For a copy please email Betsan Corkhill (Betsan@stitchlinks.com).