

New ways to support the well-being of stroke patients and carers



Gemma-Claire Ali, School funded DPhil student at the University of Cambridge Primary Care Unit, is using mixed methods research to design a mental health intervention for patient-carer dyads living with chronic physical illness, including those living with the long-term effects of stroke.

Gemma's focus is on helping patients and their informal carers to better understand and support each other's mental wellbeing. Stroke often has a negative impact on the mental health of both patients and their informal carers, and the prevalence of depressive and anxiety disorders is high in these groups. She explains: "As well as having a direct impact on quality of life, reduced mental wellbeing can negatively affect post-stroke outcomes and patient mortality. One mechanism for this is that feeling low can reduce people's motivation to adhere to recommended treatment packages and lifestyle changes. Similarly, carer motivation and ability to care is negatively impacted by damage to their own mental wellbeing. There is therefore a strong argument for improving the mental health of patients with chronic conditions and their carers."

There is a wide and increasing body of literature investigating the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve the mental wellbeing of stroke patients and their informal carers independently of each other, but according to Gemma, very little research has looked at how patient-carer dyads can support each other. Gemma's formative research involves literature reviews as well as interviews and focus groups with patients and informal carers. "Findings from these phases of research will be used to design and pilot a flexible, active-learning intervention, potentially delivered via a website or phone app, with components that patient-carer dyads can select based on their individual needs and preferences."

At PCU, Gemma's work fits into a broad portfolio of stroke research which encompasses both prevention of stroke and its long term consequences in primary care settings. It fits particularly well with the NIHR Programme Grant on Developing Primary Care Stroke Services, led by Professor Jonathan Mant. This programme develops and tests two interventions which aim to support people with stroke and their carers in primary care. The first looks at how to make best use of general practice and its interface with specialist services, while the second, in collaboration with the University of Leicester, develops a 'managing life after stroke' programme which will enable people with stroke and their carers to better understand and manage the consequences of stroke and to be better able to access services when they need them.

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Gemma applied to the Cambridge Department of Public Health and Primary Care for its reputation as a leading academic department of population health sciences. 'The Primary Care Unit's focus on identifying and targeting the behaviours that lead to chronic disease, and on early detection of illness, appealed to me, as did the unit's mix of horizontal and vertical research groups. I am a member of both the Cardiovascular Group, which works vertically across the full spectrum of cardiovascular research from prevention to management, and the Applied Social Science Group, which works horizontally across the unit using social science methods to explore patient behaviours and experiences'.



Photo credit: Phil Mynott

Key facts

About the Primary Care Unit at the University of Cambridge

- Tackles five research themes: Behaviour and Health, Cardiovascular Disease and Diabetes, Cancer, Health Services Research and End of Life Care
- Has 125 members
- Led by Professor Jonathan Mant
- Rejoined the NIHR SPCR in 2015