

Connect: inspiration for change

When the Mid-Essex speech and language therapy team needed to rethink their services to people with aphasia, they found inspiration at Connect

In January 2005 we had long waiting lists for outpatient services, and people with aphasia and their families understandably felt high levels of frustration.

Therapists felt anxious and unsupported in their work with these people. Our principle of providing long-term therapy and support for people with aphasia was impossible to manage, and in our linear model of outpatient care it was difficult to see a way to change this.

In February 2005 we held a 'Service Improvement' away day. Among the decisions we took was one to provide group therapy for people with aphasia.

We were unsure how we were going to take this decision forward and were also uncertain of how the people we were already working with would regard the proposed changes.

In April 2005 six team members attended the Connect course, *Groups work: how to design, implement and evaluate group therapy*.

As we travelled home from the course, The 'Aphasia Explorer Groups' and the new structure of our service to people with aphasia began to take shape.

Back in the department, the idea developed and we met with people with aphasia to discuss our proposals. They contributed useful insights and suggestions and attended our first Explorer Group as our 'Critical Friends'.

Two years later our service now offers initial interviews within approximately two weeks of referral. We agree a plan where people can choose from a variety of groups and/or individual therapy.

The groups, suggested by families with aphasia, currently include everyday writing skills, total communication, numbers and money, improving conversations (based on Supporting Partners of People with Aphasia in Relationships and Conversation (SPPARC) (Lock, Wilkinson and Bryan, 2001)).

The Aphasia Explorer Group – a six-week course for people with aphasia and their principal communication partner – is the most popular.

It enables participants to 'explore' aphasia, its causes, its impact, ways to help, and information about national and local services and organisations.



The Mid-Essex SLT team

At the end of each intervention individuals revisit their therapy plan and agree their future goals.

Although social model practise is difficult to evidence (Pound, 2006), our outcomes are very encouraging.

In line with Pound we found growth in the confidence of most people – measured using the Comprehensive Aphasia Test disability questionnaire (Swinburn *et al*, 2004) and, importantly, in our clients' comments.

Harry: "I feel bolder." Harry and his wife felt he no longer needed speech and language therapy after the course, having the confidence to return to their pre-stroke activities.

Mary: "I felt alone and isolated, and then came explorer groups. Fantastic. It would have been really nice to have done those things very early." Mary attends the final week of the Explorer Groups as a guest speaker, talking about her experiences. She has also spoken as part of an expert panel about her experience of aphasia.

People with aphasia have regular contact

with therapists. There is still a wait for individual therapy, but we hear less frustration regarding lack of support by our service. Therapists feel more supported and satisfied, working together, providing timely quality therapy.

A word about resources

We are a small team working in rural Essex providing services to people with acquired disorders of communication and swallowing.

The allocated time for aphasia community therapy is approximately one WTE post, provided by five therapists.

While some funds were found from within the service to provide administrative support, these changes were achieved within our existing provision.

We have developed packages of care, based on best practice and are able to provide information to service providers regarding cost and allocation of resources.

We constantly seek to improve our aphasia service and have now built strong foundations.

We want to expand the variety and frequency of groups, provide peer-led groups and work with people with aphasia as volunteers and assistants. We would also like to develop community links.

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References:

Swinburn K, Porter G, Howard D. *Comprehensive aphasia test*. Hove: Psychology Press 2004.

Lock S, Wilkinson R, Bryan K. *Supporting partners of people with aphasia in relationships and conversation*. Brackley: Speechmark 2001.

Pound C in Byng S, Duchan J, Pound C. *The Aphasia therapy file*. Hove: Psychology Press 2006.

Notes:

The next *Groups Work* course takes place on 20 June 2007. For training information contact Maria McDonnell, tel: 020 7367 0866 or email events@ukconnect.org Visit: www.ukconnect.org