

CASE STUDY: Researching the Role of Day Care Facilities to Help Reduce Health Inequalities.

Cath Lunt is one of life's jugglers. Quite apt for someone residing in the seaside town of Southport, known for its funfair and entertainment. Having kept a busy career in the NHS and a hectic family life ticking along, Cath (*pictured below*), now has one task on which to focus, namely her PhD



Studentship provided by the NIHR Collaboration in Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care North West Coast (CLAHRC NWC).

The organisation provides infrastructure for collaborations across the North West, to address the challenge of serious health inequalities across the region. As part of its Capacity Building programme it has 23 funded PhD Studentships spread across three Universities (Liverpool, Lancaster and University of Central Lancashire).

"My research interest started while working in the NHS for the Primary Care Research Network, which supported research studies taking place, particularly in GP surgeries. I found it really interesting and being part of the National Institute of Health Research, got to work on lots of interesting studies."

Juggling came to the fore as Cath decided to undertake a Master's Degree in Research Methodology in Sociology and Social Policy, while continuing with the day job.

"It was a big step to start the Master's, with the day job getting busier and a full on family life with two year old twins at the time. But I really enjoyed the practical element of research and I soon realised I wanted to be more involved in the whole process. I started thinking about doing my own research, with full control of methodologies and shaping it to move at a pace that I wanted it to. I worked with people with life limiting conditions through a local charity when I did my dissertation and realised this was something I really wanted to do in the long term."

The potential answer came in the Summer of 2014 when CLAHRC NWC advertised its studentships programme. Cath already had a nesting idea she wanted to hatch as an applied piece of research, but she had to get over the criteria for the new studentship applications.



“I applied and the CLAHRC NWC had specific themes which any proposed project had to feature. They also wanted to ensure their Partners in the collaboration would benefit from my research. The interview was in the Autumn 2014 and was quite daunting. Another huge consideration was leaving my job with the NHS after fifteen years but I really wanted to undertake the studentship as it was a fabulous opportunity to do research full time.”

Cath’s PhD studentship is located within the Academic Palliative and Supportive Care Studies Group (APSCSG) at the University of Liverpool, which has a research focus on psychosocial research within palliative care and also palliative care for hard to reach groups including those with dementia. Therefore Cath's project is embedded and supported within a network of other research which includes quantitative, qualitative and trial methodologies. The Director of APSCSG, Prof Mari Lloyd-Williams, is Cath's main supervisor along with Professor Chris Dowrick.

Cath, 40, nailed her PhD question to be “*Outcomes of Day Care for people with chronic life limiting conditions – a community embedded approach.*” This complimented the Managing Complex Needs Theme of the CLAHRC NWC and its Partner’s overarching priority of shifting care from acute settings into primary and community settings, including care within communities and families themselves.

“I wanted to see what types of service models there are and how this impacts on the people using them. People go to day care, some with carers for respite, but we don’t look at the impact it is having on wellbeing. My initial systematic review was encouraging, as most of the research had been done internationally and hardly any was UK based that specifically looked at outcomes.”

Cath has already made substantial progress with her research since starting it in March 2015.

“During my initial literature review I started to build relationships by phoning providers of day care facilities, including local authorities, voluntary groups and charities. This was to introduce myself and explain what I wanted to do. There are lots of changes to local authority funding so I wanted to make sure the project design would work and was relevant to services providing day care. It’s having belief in your research, and most services that I spoke to were quite interested so I worked



through some ideas with them of how the research could work. It’s how you engage with an organisation that’s critical at this stage. I also asked service providers to complete a questionnaire to gauge the nature of the services they provided, who uses them and what activities they regularly delivered.

“Once I received ethics approval I managed to agree with three providers in the North West to undertake my research. A further three have agreed to take part with two more subject to final agreement but should be fine once the formalities are completed.



“Now the research is in action, I am regularly visiting the facilities to collect my data. I think the findings will be very useful to CLAHRC NWC Partners, who commission day care services, on what works best in day care for the wellbeing of service users.”

For many Local Authorities, day care facilities are linked to packages of care offered to those being discharged from hospital and the day care sector has a key role to play in further integration of these services.

“Ethnographic methods are an important part of the study. I have been performing initial observations, recording field notes to better understand how the services work, later on I’ll be capturing data with samples of service users over three month blocks. My research also captures the pathway taken by the individual service user to be at that particular day care facility, so how they’re referred and then access day care.

“Things that can seem trivial have a big impact in these facilities. For example, access to transport can really impact on how people can maintain independence and wellbeing. Just discovering these issues and capturing them can help shape research that makes a difference. Overall, the response from service users has been positive and the majority of people have been very engaging which has helped the research flow well. The first 12 months of the studentship has been really busy and enjoyable and I’m looking forward to the next phase of research now.

“This project is both topical and timely and I believe it has the potential to reduce health inequalities. That train of thought really keeps me motivated and makes me feel what I’m researching is really worthwhile.”

Cath’s progress will continue to be updated on the CLAHRC NWC website.

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