

Children and Complementary Therapy Network (CCTN) Conference

Complementary Therapies and Autism

Held at Birmingham Children's Hospital on 20.05.06

Write up by Amanda Roberts

The conference this year was bigger and attracted a wider range of participants, including teachers and other health care professionals who are interested in the use of complementary therapies for children with autism, and their results.

The first speaker at this year's conference, Dr Basia Bielinski, a Consultant Paediatrician, gave an excellent overview of autism from a traditional point of view. Dr Bielinski pointed out that autism is not a new problem and that there are many examples of similarly affected people throughout early medical history. The 'recent increase' in cases was probably due to a widening definition and understanding of autism in the last 30-40 years. The talk covered the autistic spectrum, including Asperger's Syndrome. Problems such as learning difficulties and epilepsy are increased in this group. A way of defining autism that is broadly recognised throughout the world is through the '*Triad of Impairment*': impairment of socialisation, communication and imagination. The talk finished with some of the science behind autism (causes are unknown) and different forms of intervention available.

The next section of the conference involved four 15 minute slots for CCTN members to describe their work with autistic children. In the afternoon there were another 3 slots. These were excellent and informative. All the speakers had volunteered to speak and it was clear that a lot of very good projects using complementary therapies within different settings are occurring. The various therapies used by the speakers included: shiatsu (Frank Forman); chiropractic (Deirdre Edwards); aromatherapy (Paula Smith); Bowen (Alex Holloway); reiki (Laura Barbour / David McCarthy); reflexology (Elizabeth Calderara); and healing (Sandy Edwards). All of the therapists described excellent results and reported that the children / families / schools / support workers were all happy with the treatments.

Frank Forman described his work with children with autism in a Special Needs School setting and how the shiatsu benefited them. The school staff also commented on how the children benefited from his input. Frank found this work to be a big learning experience. He noted that many of the children had an underlying emotion of fear. He also highlighted the importance of working with respect and compassion.

Deirdre Edwards, a paediatric nurse with midwifery experience and a qualified health visitor with years of expertise, gave an excellent presentation on the benefits of chiropractic treatment for babies and children. As a McTimoney chiropractor treating the body as a whole, from top to toe - Deirdre looked at birth trauma and how this can affect a child's development later on. Some difficult births are followed up with excellent recovery, whereas others lead to an accumulation of problems, which could lead to autistic traits. Through early chiropractic treatment changes can be initiated to maximise the effectiveness of the nervous system. Compensatory factors are addressed and parents are provided with guidelines for care and postural needs. Deirdre has had excellent results within her practice with closed off children becoming open to learning with good developmental progress enhancing their quality of life. Deirdre, with 35 years of experience, believes the enhancement of a healthy development of the maturing nervous

system is the key to optimum health, and top to toe assessment at birth is an area to be explored on a national scale.

Paula Smith's project takes place within a college and involves young people (YP) with Asperger's syndrome receiving a series of aromatherapy treatments. The students have a choice in whether or not to take part, and it is made clear to them that confidentiality is at a team level. The students' needs were assessed through information from the students themselves and the college staff as well as information from nursing staff, GP's, and in certain cases, the students' parents/family members. I believe this is important as the more information shared within strict guidelines the safer the child/YP will become. This fits in with the Every Child Matters agenda and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). It was recognised that massage would not work in all circumstances, and therefore a range of additional strategies were used including visualization and body awareness work. The project has been successful in a number of areas. There have been 'observable changes in levels of confidence and relaxation and in students' ability to make connections between massage and relaxation.'

Alex Holloway started by giving a description of Bowen therapy. She then recounted how children with autism have benefited from a free Bowen clinic in Wales run by Howard Plummer. This clinic has been a catalyst for the setting up of other similar clinics nationally.

Laura Barbour and David McCarthy talked about how they have introduced reiki to children with autism coming to them as part of a social services respite package. They have devised some innovative ways to engage with the children and brought along some of the props they use to enable this.

Elizabeth Calderara started her talk with creating audience confusion by doing a series of random undecipherable actions. This was in order to get the audience to understand how the world might appear to an autistic child and to experience the feelings that an autistic child might experience (e.g. fear) when confronted with a world they cannot understand. Elizabeth and Dr Bielinski also stated something which we all need to remember, and that is that parents can take a long time to accept their child's diagnosis and to ask for help on any level. Children can often be 7-8 before parents seek help. Elizabeth spoke about giving reflexology to her nephew who has autism. Her results have been excellent on the emotional/behavioural level and also physically in treating symptoms like constipation.

The last of the 15 minute slot speakers, Sandy Edwards, gave an energetic talk about the principles and practice of NFSH Healing (a non-religious therapy) followed by 4 case reports of how children with autism had benefited from healing. She also highlighted the importance of care workers/therapists retaining the integrity of their own energy. For example, if one feels drained after being with a patient when simultaneously the patient has become more lively, the carer may have unwittingly parted with their own energy. Learning to avoid unhealthy energy transference is one of the first aspects covered in NFSH healer training.

After lunch Lesley Powell spoke about the *Training and Support Programme (TSP)* for parents and their children with autism. The idea of the TSP is to teach parents simple massage movements / positive touch techniques for use in the home environment. Lesley has conducted research into the effectiveness of the TSP - 'To explore the experience and meaning of touch, before, during and after attending the TSP' and 'To develop a model of the process of giving massage / positive touch for this group of parents and children'. 27

parents and their children (mean age 7 years) took part. Before the programme parents felt out of control and that any touch was on the children's terms. The conclusion of the research for parents was that bonding, feeling closer and communication all improved. For the children improved sleep, well-being, communication, bonding, positive touch, self-awareness and empowerment were the key outcomes. Lesley is teaching her technique to other therapists. She concluded by stating the importance of more research and funding. Both these last issues came up more than once throughout the conference.

Dr Shah then gave a presentation on the reasoning behind a major new development for the CCTN, namely the introduction of a Network wide parent feedback questionnaire for the evaluation of the use of complementary therapies with children with autism. The idea is to have a single form to be used throughout the Network, thus allowing information to be collected in a co-ordinated way from a large cohort of users. The questionnaire will also enable the Network to demonstrate how complementary therapists are fulfilling some of the national Government agendas for child and family services. A draft version of the questionnaire was set up prior to the conference and e-mailed out to all the CCTN members for their appraisal and feedback. Further discussion took place at the conference about what should be in the questionnaire. The finalised questionnaire will be distributed to all the CCTN members for their use shortly. The plan is to use the questionnaire for 6 months, after which the results will be collated and presented at next year's conference. This questionnaire is a simple form of evaluation and I would encourage all therapists who treat autistic babies, children and YP to participate.

Part of the afternoon was also set aside for people from the same geographical regions to be able to network with each other, something that had been requested from last year's conference. Encouragingly, following this session, some of the regional groups have made plans to continue to network outside of the conference.

Overall, the conference was very well run, organised and kept to schedule. The lunch was excellent and gave us all a chance to network with each other. I shall look forward to attending further conferences.

The CCTN is co-ordinated by Dr Pankaj Shah and Julia Fearon as part of the Children's Project at Freshwinds Charity. Special thanks to both of them for the hard work that they put into setting up this conference.

For further information about the Children's Complementary Therapy Network and a registration form (it is free to join the Network):

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