

RAPID RESEARCH IN COVID-19 PROGRAMME

Online Supportive Conversations and Reflection Sessions (OSCaRS)

A Feasibility Study with care home staff during the pandemic

AIMS

A study in three care homes was undertaken to assess the feasibility of providing online emotional support and practice-based learning on death/dying and end of life care during the pandemic of 2020, to groups of staff in care homes for older people.

KEY FINDINGS

- The provision of supportive conversations and reflection sessions to care home staff is feasible and acceptable to staff and management. Future implementation should consider the timing of sessions to accommodate staff workflows, the engagement and support of managers, and, the availability of sufficient devices with cameras to aid participation and social distancing across the home.
- Facilitators of OSCaRS should have experience of the care home context, work practices and workforce, and, knowledge of palliative and end of life care.
- Staff with different roles in the homes attended OSCaRS together and shared their experiences and knowledge. This enhanced feelings of togetherness and aided team cohesion.
- Participants valued having a safe space to discuss and share their experiences openly. This offered affirmation and reassurance in addition to the opportunity to reflect on their practice and develop future skills and confidence in end of life care.
- Having less knowledge and experience of death/dying and end of life care practice and principles and/or less confidence in talking with relatives appeared to be related to lack of on-site nurses and highlighted the need for increased work-based emotional/wellbeing support.
- Online Supportive Conversations and Reflection Sessions (OSCaRS) with the support of palliative care professionals can help mitigate the emotional trauma of COVID-19.
- We found that OSCaRS are a feasible, acceptable and beneficial way of providing emotional/wellbeing support through context and challenge specific supportive conversations with care staff which also provides much needed practice-based opportunities to learn about end of life care.

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- Valuable initiatives, such as OSCaRS, that link practice-based learning and psychological wellbeing cannot be provided as a short term response to COVID-19. The real benefits for staff and residents will come from working collaboratively with care homes to embed recovery for their staff and empower longer-term resilience.

WHAT DID THE STUDY INVOLVE?

This project is aligned to the Care Home Innovation Partnership in Lothian. Prior to the pandemic a small number of care homes had identified face-to-face monthly reflective after-death debriefing sessions as an initiative that could support staff and develop end of life care knowledge and skills amongst their workforce. Lockdown and visiting restrictions meant that external facilitators could not attend the sessions and a decision was made to assess the provision online using CSO Rapid Research in Covid-19 Programme funds.

Between May and August 2020 eleven OSCaR sessions were delivered in three care homes via an online meetings platform (MS Teams or Zoom). They were co-facilitated by two academic nurses with specialism in palliative care. Each session was held in the afternoon and limited to 45 minutes. Sessions structured around an adapted version of the after-death reflective tool to accommodate the excess deaths that had occurred within the challenging context of the pandemic. Each session began with introductions followed by a relaxation exercise; staff in any role were invited to attend.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Edinburgh Napier University School of Health and Social Care Ethics Committee. The evaluation involved (i) interviews with 4 OSCaR participants, 2 care home managers and the session facilitators and (ii) the distribution of an online pre/post survey to all staff in the care homes. Sessions and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis has been undertaken, to date, this has focussed on feasibility and acceptability of the intervention and staff reported impact and value.

In parallel to this pilot, we completed a scoping review of published literature for best practice in supporting the resilience and retention of frontline care workers in care homes for older people. A preprint is available: <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.09.05.20188847v1>

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

A total of 34 staff members attended one or more OSCaR session, including care assistants, senior care assistant, registered nurses and activity providers. In Care Home One staff were more likely to attend two or more sessions, whereas in Care Home Two, a total of 21 staff attended one of the five sessions. Care Home Three was unable to complete the feasibility study due to a change of manager and limited time of senior staff to accommodate both the evaluation and set up in the time available. At present care home managers and staff have severely limited capacity to engage with

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initiatives, accept and utilise support resources and implement additional training for their staff. This study offers learning on how to work with care homes to implement and embed practice-based wellbeing support and education during a pandemic; it also improved our knowledge of how to address the implications of this on evaluation and research.

The pre-OSCaRS survey asked staff how confident they felt when speaking to a relative who is dying or has died. It was evident that whilst experienced nurses were confident to do this well, care staff were much more likely to respond that although they lacked confidence, finding it for example uncomfortable or upsetting, they 'did their best' and always offered comfort and support to the bereaved.

We found online delivery to be feasible and acceptable. Staff appreciated that the sessions were facilitated by external practitioners who had an understanding of care homes and expertise in palliative and end of life care. The OSCaRS offered a safe space for staff to talk about their experiences in relation to death and dying of residents they all knew well, be actively listened to, and have their feelings acknowledged and understood by their peers. Staff valued the opportunity to attend an OSCaR session during work hours, with the support of management. OSCaRS contributed to feeling emotionally supported by their seniors and peers, enhanced team communication and cohesion, and provided practice-based opportunities for care home staff to learn about caring for residents and their families at the end of life. Quotes to illustrate feedback provided by participants are given below:

"We spoke about lots of different things and I think it was helpful to speak about the deaths so that my colleagues could see it's affecting us as well... we're not immune to the sadness and the loss."
[Nurse]

"I really enjoyed the session because having gone through this experience of COVID in the care home and having had multiple deaths, being able to talk about that to people who are genuinely interested and have an idea of care in care homes was a lot different from coming to work and just talking with your colleagues." [Care Assistant]

"Yeah, it is very successful, and staff are coming back saying they have really benefitted from taking part.... I think it's possibly that it's been done with someone that staff don't know so well... I feel that they open-up a wee bit more." [Manager]

This work highlights the importance of care home staff having well developed communication skills and confidence to talk about death and dying. These skills are of critical importance during restricted visiting where communication with relatives is not face to face. The majority of care home staff are not trained nurses and OSCaRS provided a safe opportunity for practice-based learning through reflection on the death of a resident. Palliative and end of life care are critical skills for care home

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staff who now care for an increasingly frail population. However currently such training is not statutory for frontline care workers. The assessment of feasibility and impact has also provided useful knowledge as to how best to incorporate evaluation tools and approaches whilst working to embed practice-based support and learning.

This study has demonstrated that engaging care home staff in online structured supportive conversations is a feasible and valuable addition to the current approaches, providing much needed practice-based opportunities for care home staff to learn about delivering palliative and end of life care. OSCaRS also serve to provide emotional support through supportive conversations embedded within the immediate context and challenges of the disruptions to normal care home life as a result of COVID-19.

WHAT IMPACT COULD THE FINDINGS HAVE?

These findings will be high impact. OSCaRS are a feasible, relatively inexpensive and valuable way to support the care home workforce as they recover from the initial impact of COVID-19 and prepare for future challenges. The findings must inform the development of both short term immediate COVID-19 response support to care homes and longer-term sustainable ways to embed emotional and wellbeing support within practice-based education and learning. We will continue to analyse the various rich sources of data gathered as part of this study and disseminate key learning. The Team have been approached by other care homes to provide OSCaRS and we are in discussions with Lothian based services to roll out OSCaRS to other care homes. We are developing a guide to implementing OSCaRS and to date have trained an additional session facilitator. This summary report will be emailed to health and social care organisations and networks across Scotland with direct links to care homes. The findings will be presented at EuGMS (European Geriatric Medicine Society) and BGS (British Geriatrics Society) e-congress, and are being written up for submission for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

CONCLUSION

OSCaRS are feasible and of value, and, should be considered as a component within the developing suite of services and resources that will be provided as part of the required enhanced professional clinical and care oversight of care homes across Scotland.

Externally facilitated, emotional support and practice reflection through Online Supportive Conversations and Reflection (OSCaR) sessions can help mitigate the emotional trauma of COVID-19 whilst also developing end of life care practice. They provide much needed immediate support and learning to frontline care staff in the short term, but must be provided collaboratively with care homes to ensure embedded recovery for their staff and the empowerment of longer-term resilience.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

This project was completed in September 2020 and received £20,865

We would like to thank the Care Homes who contributed to this study