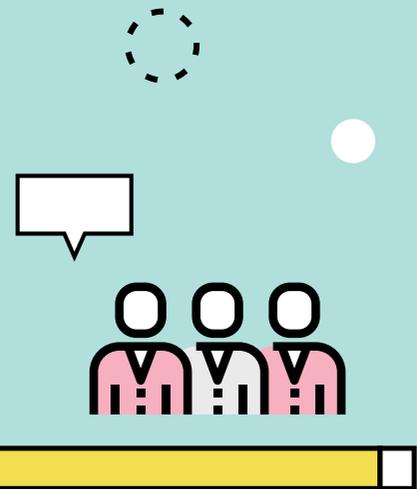


# RIGHT PLACEMENT, RIGHT TIME



*KAREN DEMPSEY* EXPLAINS HOW THE AWARENESS CENTRE OVERCOMES THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH MORE THAN 70 PLACEMENT THERAPISTS TO DELIVER A SUCCESSFUL COUNSELLING SERVICE, ALONGSIDE IAPT



When The Awareness Centre (TAC) started working with Lambeth Talking Therapies four years ago to provide counselling at GP surgeries in Lambeth, London, nobody could have predicted just how successful the partnership would be.<sup>1</sup> With 81 therapists offering counselling in GP surgeries across Lambeth, the counselling service is consistently exceeding recovery target rates. Waiting list numbers have nearly halved since the beginning of 2015, with the majority of patients seeing a therapist within four weeks of contacting the service.

Out of the 81 therapists at TAC, four are senior practitioners and three are team leaders. However, key to delivering the counselling service is a team of 74 therapists who are on placement. It has been no mean feat to recruit, train and retain so many trainee counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists to deliver the targets set by Lambeth Talking Therapies. This article explores how TAC continues to overcome those challenges.

## STEPPING STONES

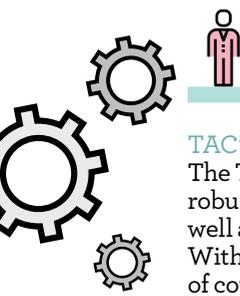
TAC opened its doors 12 years ago in Clapham, south-west London, offering counselling, psychotherapy and psychology to the London community. Within weeks of opening, two GP surgeries in Lambeth contacted

Michaela McCarthy, psychotherapist and managing director of TAC, to run their counselling service. TAC was eventually subcontracted by an organisation that had taken over part of the counselling service in Lambeth. TAC then extended its work to eight surgeries across the borough, using its counselling model.

Four years ago, the commissioners wanted a new integrated talking therapies service, in which IAPT and a counselling service would work in partnership.<sup>2</sup> This service went out to tender. Lambeth IAPT approached many counselling organisations, but decided to include TAC's counselling model in the overall tender.

The new integrated talking therapies tender was awarded to Lambeth IAPT and TAC to work in partnership and contracted by South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM). Lambeth IAPT and TAC counselling service agreed to work together for an initial three-year period, but the service worked out so well that the contract was extended to five years.

The success of the partnership has led to TAC recently winning the contract to work in partnership with Wandsworth IAPT for three years. This partnership will be known as 'Talk Wandsworth', with IAPT providing the CBT component, and TAC providing the counselling.



### TAC'S COUNSELLING SERVICE MODEL

The TAC counselling service model has proved to be robust and effective, offering benefits to patients as well as to the therapists who provide the counselling. Within TAC, the Lambeth Talking Therapies provision of counselling is led by a clinical director. Reporting to her are three team leaders, four clinical supervisors and a clinical manager. They are together responsible for overseeing the work of the 74 trainee therapists on placement with TAC, as well as four senior employed therapists, who provide short-term counselling (6–12 sessions) in a surgery.

The team leaders ensure the smooth running of the service and also have a caseload of clients. One of their key roles is to train therapists to use the IAPTus database system, which gathers information related to patient history, risk, medication, and details of other professionals involved with a case. Therapists make sure their diaries are up to date through IAPTus, so that new patients can be booked in. Data from each counselling session are also recorded on IAPTus. In short, IAPTus functions as a case management system to make sure that patients do not fall through the net.

Other team leader duties include liaising with practice managers in surgeries, troubleshooting diary issues regarding patient attendance, allocating risk patients, supporting the volunteer and employed therapists' everyday practice, and providing monthly reports on attendance data and performance.

Weekly, free-of-charge clinical supervision is provided to all placement therapists, as well as to the qualified counsellors and team leaders, with an approach that supports the short-term counselling provided to NHS patients. Supervisors write reports to support course requirements and the accreditation process.

The clinical manager oversees the recruitment and training of placement therapists, and helps ensure that weekly and monthly session targets are met. Therapists work in accordance with comprehensive policies and procedures to support best practice and develop their skills.

TAC team members meet monthly to ensure everyone is on track with targets, and to discuss ongoing improvements to the service. There is also a quarterly meeting with the commissioners to present statistics and discuss the overall service. The managing director and clinical director continually develop the counselling service model so that it can be adapted to support other services within the public sector.

### THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING PLACEMENT THERAPISTS

Placement therapists are recruited from institutions offering accredited therapy training. They include counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists from a wide range of modalities, including humanistic, integrative and psychodynamic approaches. All are members of a professional body (including the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy [BACP], the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy [UKCP]

and the British Psychological Society [BPS]). TAC advertises widely and takes time to build relationships with the training institutions that require placements for their trainees. TAC serves a multi-ethnic community and ensures that its recruitment processes are inclusive of all cultures.

What's unique about a placement at TAC is that it has three levels, depending on where therapists are in their development. They can graduate to the next level by building their experience and confidence in working with diverse client groups, with support from team leaders and supervisors.

- **Level 1** is for trainee therapists who are studying for their diploma, but have not yet accumulated many client hours. They start seeing clients in TAC's low-cost service.
- **Level 2** is for trainee therapists who have already accumulated 40–65 supervised client hours. They can see up to four clients per week in a GP surgery and four clients per week in TAC's low-cost service.
- **Level 3** is for therapists who are qualified and working towards accreditation and transition into private practice. They can see up to four clients per week in a GP surgery, plus up to four clients per week in TAC's low-cost service. They can also see three clients per week in HMP Brixton.

TAC recruits new therapists every month via a rigorous group interview that tests clinical skills, knowledge and experience. All placement therapists take part in a two-day training programme that covers clinical assessment, risk assessment, working with patients short term and long term, and good practice management. After Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks have been completed, therapists can start in surgery within weeks of interview. The recruitment process is designed to be speedy so that there is a large pool of therapists to provide counselling in surgeries.

There are several challenges involved in recruiting and retaining the quantity and quality of therapists required to deliver optimum service. For TAC, these challenges include supervising such a large and diverse group of therapists, who can vary in terms of background, experience and skills. To be effective in the role, it is essential that all therapists are fully trained on IAPTus and in surgery etiquette. Some therapists take longer than others to settle in. They may lack the necessary administrative skills or be unaware of what is needed for good practice management. This can be supported and overcome during the initial training that TAC offers. Other challenges for TAC team leaders include managing patient demands, especially when they need to change surgery or therapist, and offering support to therapists who are working with clients who are at risk.

For placement therapists, the challenges can include juggling their time between studying, working, personal life and placements, all of which can be very time-consuming. Therapists are asked to sign up for two years and to commit to between four and eight clinical hours per week, plus weekly supervision and a compulsory





training weekend. This means they can easily achieve their hours for qualification and accreditation. However, in practice, the placement can become too much for some therapists and they choose to leave before they have completed their two-year stint. This is a challenge to resources, as so much is invested in training therapists to be efficient with IAPTus and surgery procedures. TAC has addressed this by introducing a more robust recruitment approach, as well as including clauses in the therapists' contract to keep them on board. TAC also supports therapists as they transition into private practice, especially with the busy referrals system that it operates through its counselling centre.

The NHS placement requires a minimum of intermediate IT proficiency and good administration and practice management skills. Not all placement therapists possess the requisite administration skills to manage the paperwork and online IAPTus database system. It can be daunting to use an NHS system for the first time. TAC works to overcome these fears through team leader support with initial training on IAPTus, troubleshooting sessions and further training where necessary. Therapists are supported daily and weekly until IAPTus becomes second nature. Although the systems may initially feel overwhelming for new placement therapists, the integration of these skills plays an integral part in their development and stands them in good stead for moving into private practice.<sup>3</sup>

While the experience on placement at TAC equips therapists for life in the real world, it can be demanding of both their inner and outer resources. A TAC placement is not for the faint-hearted. TAC requires placement therapists to be in personal therapy for the duration of their placement, to help them process any issues that emerge.

 *TAC currently offers counselling in more than 25 languages. This is cost-effective and supports the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist*

#### THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

People registered with a GP surgery in Lambeth can refer themselves for counselling. GPs can also make referrals to Lambeth Talking Therapies, which will triage patients over the phone. The triage team asks a series of questions about patients' mental and emotional health to ascertain whether they would benefit from counselling, CBT, self-help, a workshop or another service.

If patients are referred for counselling, then the triage team will book the patient into one of the counselling slots made available by counsellors on IAPTus. While every attempt is made to assign a patient to see a counsellor at their home surgery, the demands of time and place may mean that patients are seen at a different location. If the patient has particular needs, or is at risk, then the team leader is alerted by triage and will step in to assign the patient to a particular counsellor or surgery.

Risk clients are only assigned to more experienced therapists; clinical supervisors make the decision as to when therapists are ready to step up to this level. Counselling sessions are available seven days a week, including some weekday morning, early evening and Saturday and Sunday slots.

The triage team also decides whether a client will receive low-intensity counselling (six sessions) or high-intensity counselling (12 sessions). This decision is dependent on the complexity of client presentation, as well as level of risk. During their placement, therapists will gain experience of working with both high- and low-intensity patients.

Patients at risk of self-harm or suicide are given priority and assigned to the more experienced counsellors. TAC and Lambeth Talking Therapies have a structured risk protocol, based around a 'RAG' system, with Red signifying definite and immediate risk, and Amber identifying possible but not immediate risk. Therapists carry out an extra risk assessment with higher-risk clients, writing to the GP to inform them of the risk and letting them know that the patient is in counselling. Therapists also update their supervisor and team leader via email after each weekly session with a risk patient. The rigour of the system helps patients at risk to feel heard, understood and contained, and any concerns can be raised immediately.

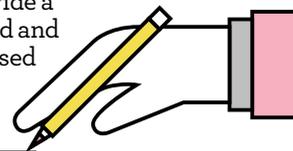
Many of the placement therapists have English as their second language. This has great benefits to patients, as it means that interpreters are not needed in the counselling room. TAC currently offers counselling in more than 25 languages. This is cost-effective and supports the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist.

However, this can be a challenge when recruiting, as TAC requires a proficient level of English and IT skills of its therapists in order for them to pass the interview stage. It has had to turn down some applicants because of this.

A condition of receiving counselling through a GP surgery is that patients need to complete a questionnaire every week. The Patient Health

Questionnaire (PHQ-9) determines levels of depression, while the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) determines levels of anxiety. The scores from the questionnaires are entered by therapists into IAPTus after each session. It is these scores, and how far they reduce over the six to 12 weeks of treatment, that determine the recovery rates mentioned earlier, offering further evidence that short-term interventions can benefit patient mental health.<sup>4</sup>

Most patients embrace the questionnaires as a way of noting their own recovery week by week. Therapists report that the patient questionnaires can provide a compass that keeps the short-term work focused and on track. They are also used as a tool and discussed within the therapeutic process so that patients become aware of and understand their issues.





The counselling in surgery is only available short term, but therapists and team leaders can signpost patients on to other services after the sessions have ended. One option for more complex patients is to be referred to the Integrated Psychological Therapy Teams (IPTT) panel, which assesses whether the patient could benefit from longer-term psychotherapy on the NHS. Another option is to transfer to TAC's low-cost service at its centre in Clapham, where therapy sessions are offered from £15.

#### WHAT PLACEMENT THERAPISTS SAY ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE

Therapists volunteering with TAC frequently cite their experience in an NHS surgery as one of the highlights of their placement. They have the opportunity to work with clients from diverse backgrounds and with complex and varied presentations. The breadth and depth of experience at TAC means that placement therapists are prepared both for private work and for being able to work within public and private sector teams.

Therapists also learn what it's like to work short term, and realise that patients can feel better after a few sessions. Although most therapists are trained in long-term work, the NHS experience offers another perspective, demonstrating what can be achieved short term. The experience of working within a multidisciplinary team in an NHS environment, and using PHQ-9 and GAD-7 scores, also makes the work feel more real and motivating.

Below are a couple of quotes from TAC placement counsellors:

'If you are intending to work for a public sector organisation after you've qualified, then you can't beat doing an NHS placement with TAC. You don't get this learning in your training, and it's real on-the-job experience.' *Denise Sims*

'You have clients from all walks of life, and that's the exciting thing about it: people can present with any issue. The surprising thing is that we can make a difference to people's lives in six sessions. Big changes can happen in a short space of time.' *Haydn Forde*

 *Therapists volunteering with TAC... have the opportunity to work with clients from diverse backgrounds and with complex and varied presentations. Therapists also learn what it's like to work short term, and realise that patients can feel better after a few sessions*

#### WORKING IN BRIXTON PRISON

The success of the relationship with Lambeth Talking Therapies led to TAC being awarded a contract by NHS England to provide counselling to inmates in HMP Brixton. From April 2014, a team of eight therapists from TAC became part of the healthcare team in HMP Brixton,

offering counselling support to prisoners at different stages of their prison life. In order to be able to offer counselling to HMP Brixton inmates, TAC placement therapists have to be at level 3; in other words, they are experienced practitioners, ready for private practice. There is also a qualified counsellor/supervisor working with them.

Issues addressed in prisoner counselling can include anxiety, depression, anger, bereavement or substance misuse, family and relationship issues, and how the prisoners' lives have changed while serving their sentence. The prison counselling model has worked well over the last couple of years: prisoners have reported positive outcomes from their counselling sessions, and the waiting list has been reduced to zero.<sup>5</sup> This work has not been without its challenges, however. Security clearance takes some time (necessarily so) and sometimes inmates are not able to attend sessions because of lockdowns in the prison. Although the challenges are huge, therapists find this to be a rewarding experience, which is both humbling and demanding. The prison placement is only for therapists who are robust, experienced and solid and is definitely not suitable for someone with few client hours. Strong supervision necessarily plays a key role in the placement.

#### WHAT'S NEXT FOR TAC?

TAC will be busy recruiting placement therapists to fulfil the Wandsworth counselling contract from early 2017. It will also tender for more counselling services within the NHS and other public sector organisations. This will mean developing the counselling placement, as well as expanding the TAC team to employ more therapists and staff. TAC also expects to see several more counselling centres open up in the next few years. With its strong track record at HMP Brixton, and with learning taken from the last two-and-a-half years, TAC will also be bidding for further prison contracts in future.

Michaela McCarthy, Managing Director, has a long-term vision for TAC: 'As well as winning and delivering public sector contracts, we will be developing our low-cost and private practice service. As our centres expand, we envisage having 1,000 therapists in our low-cost counselling placement, and 1,500 therapists working in private practice over the next three years. Our footprint will expand beyond south London, and TAC will develop a stronger presence in the therapy field right across the capital. It will clearly be a challenge to recruit, train and manage

such a high number of placement therapists. We will also have to ensure that our centres outside south London reach the same standards as our centre in Clapham. But after 12 years of running TAC, I know that it's the people we hire and develop who are at the heart of driving all our projects forward.'

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKING WITH PLACEMENT THERAPISTS:

- establish strong ongoing relationships with training institutions
- bring in strong clinical supervisors who can adapt their approach to support placement therapists with varying levels of experience and skills
- advertise widely to attract a diverse range of placement therapists
- create robust protocols within the organisation to provide a framework that contains and supports the placement therapists
- provide a challenging and informative training programme to induct new therapists into your way of working
- model high standards of practice management
- hire from within: the best team leaders can come from therapists who have been on placement
- offer a diverse patient experience that will be invaluable for therapists entering private practice
- include a probationary period to iron out any issues the therapist or organisation is facing
- continually review and improve standards, protocols and procedures. ■

### READER RESPONSE

The author would welcome feedback on this article. To contact her, please email: [hcpj.editorial@bacp.co.uk](mailto:hcpj.editorial@bacp.co.uk)

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