

NORTHERN IRELAND PILOT PROJECT

From February 2007 to February 2008, Get Well UK ran the UK's first government-backed complementary therapy pilot. Sixteen practitioners provided treatments including acupuncture, osteopathy, homeopathy and aromatherapy, to more than 700 patients at two GP practices in Belfast and Derry.

The BBC made an hour long documentary which was broadcast on BBC1 NI on 5 May 2008.

Following the successful completion of the pilot, the results were analysed by Social and Market Research and recommendations were made to the Health Minister.

The objectives were:

- To measure the health outcomes of the service and monitor health improvements.
- To redress inequalities in access to complementary medicine by providing therapies through the NHS, allowing access regardless of income.
- To contribute to best practise in the field of delivering complementary therapies through primary care.
- To provide work for suitably skilled and qualified practitioners.
- To increase patient satisfaction with quick access to expert care.
- To help patients learn skills to improve and retain their health.
- To free up GP time to work with other patients.
- To deliver the programme for 700 patients.

The findings can be summarised as follows:

Following the pilot, 80% of patients reported an improvement in their symptoms, 64% took less time off work and 55% reduced their use of painkillers.

In the pilot, 713 patients with a range of ages and demographic backgrounds and either physical or mental health conditions were referred to various complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies via nine GP practices in Belfast and Londonderry. Patients assessed their own health and wellbeing pre and post therapy and GPs and CAM practitioners also rated patients' responses to treatment and the overall effectiveness of the scheme.

Health improvement

- 81% of patients reported an improvement in their physical health
- 79% reported an improvement in their mental health
- 84% of patients linked an improvement in their health and wellbeing directly to their CAM treatment
- In 65% of patient cases, GPs documented a health improvement, correlating closely to patient-reported improvements
- 94% of patients said they would recommend CAM to another patient with their condition
- 87% of patient indicated a desire to continue with their CAM treatment

Painkillers and medication

- Half of GPs reported prescribing less medication and all reported that patients had indicated to them that they needed less
- 62% of patients reported suffering from less pain
- 55% reported using less painkillers following treatment
- Patients using medication reduced from 75% before treatment to 61% after treatment
- 44% of those taking medication before treatment had reduced their use afterwards

Health service and social benefits

- 24% of patients who used health services prior to treatment (i.e., primary and secondary care, accident and emergency) reported using the services less after treatment
- 65% of GPs reported seeing the patient less following the CAM referral
- Half of GPs said the scheme had reduced their workload and 17% reported a financial saving for their practice
- Half of GPs said their patients were using secondary care services less

GPs

Despite initial scepticism, the GPs involved were almost unanimously in favour after seeing tangible results. In 99% of patient cases GPs said they would refer the patient, or a different patient, to the scheme again and in 98% of cases GPs said they would recommend the service to other GPs. However, they also called for more information to help build their understanding of CAM therapies.

An educational CD was sent to every GP in Northern Ireland.