

2014 Knowledge Transfer Scheme

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Title of research project: Improving adjustment for children whose parents have cancer by increasing staff knowledge and awareness of support needs and delivering a tested psychosocial intervention for young children.

Abstract: When a parent is diagnosed with cancer the family, including the children (often the forgotten voice), bears the impact of the disease (Osborn 2007, Semple & McCaughan 2013). Research on the impact of parental cancer for children has evolved in the past two decades. This highlights that children have an increased risk of psychological and social difficulties due to parental cancer (Visser et al 2004, Osborn 2007). Difficulties reported include separation anxiety, depression and poor family cohesion (Heiney et al 1997, Visser et al 2004, Watson et al 2006, Semple & McCance 2010, Weaver et al 2010).

There is growing recognition that open communication with children about their parent's illness minimises distress (Huizinga et al, 2003). Efforts have been made towards reducing the psychosocial impact of parental cancer for children with peer-group intervention (Niemelä et al 2010). After reviewing the evidence, the chosen intervention which is delivered internationally will be Children's Lives Include Moments of Bravery (CLIMB®). CLIMB® is run as a six week group intervention for children aged 5 to 12 years old whose parents have cancer. The goals of CLIMB® are: a) provide age appropriate education about cancer, b) normalise emotions that a child experiences when their parent has cancer, c) support communication of complex emotions associated with parental cancer and d) improve coping by connecting children in similar situations. This intervention is currently delivered by one voluntary organisation in NI, namely Cancer Focus NI. This intervention was externally evaluated in NI by Semple & McCaughan (2013) and despite overwhelming positive findings, parents and health care professionals (HCPs) reported i) point of diagnosis being an especially stressful juncture; ii) need for earlier intervention from HCPs; iii) although the clinical cancer teams were well placed to provide support on how best to communicate with children and manage the family this was often lacking; iv) an inequity of service provision as this intervention (CLIMB®) is hosted in Belfast; therefore children in more rural settings are geographically disadvantaged.

The overall aim of this project is to increase oncology professionals' knowledge of the support needs for families impacted by parental cancer and to implement the psychosocial intervention (CLIMB®)

for children aged 5 -12 years whose parents have cancer in all five acute oncology setting in NI. Specific objectives include: a) increase awareness amongst oncology professionals on the potential difficulties for families when a parent is diagnosed with cancer; b) develop and extend networks to support best practice in oncology setting for parents diagnosed with cancer; c) train relevant HCPs (Clinical Nurse Specialist, Therapeutic Radiographers, Macmillan Support & Information Managers) in the five acute oncology settings in NI to enable them to deliver the intervention in their local setting at a critical and appropriate time point; d) delivery and evaluation of the intervention; e) maintain momentum and influence mainstream practice by disseminating good practice through seminars, conferences and publications.

The proposed knowledge exchange will impact upon the children, parents and professionals who are dealing with parents diagnosed with cancer. The likely impact includes: 1) oncology HCPs will have improved knowledge and confidence that can be utilised in their everyday practice when caring for cancer patients who have young children, thus reducing stress and burnout; 2) increased number of children accessing the psychosocial intervention, thus reducing distress associated with parental cancer; 3) reduction in parental distress as the emotional needs of their children are being addressed; 4) improved partnership between stakeholders as voluntary and statutory bodies are working towards a shared goal.