



South West London  
**Academic, Health and Social Care**  
 System

## Case Studies- Series 1

# Equipping Care Staff to Handle Difficult Conversations

Providing person-centred care is now a key tenet across the UK's health and social care services. But how can staff take someone's end of life or long-term care wishes into account when many still feel uncomfortable speaking to patients about these issues in the first place? Recognising this skills gap SWLS funded the development of *Difficult Conversations* training to a widening array of health and social care professionals.



### **Dementia Patient Discussion Training**

Dr Catherine Millington-Sanders and end of life care lead facilitator JJ Nadicksbernd originally designed *Difficult Conversations* as a short course for GPs and community-based nurses in Richmond. However they soon identified there was a sizeable cohort of staff in care home settings who could use similar training, particularly

in regard to long-term care patients with dementia. SWLS funded the team to develop a new course that would be delivered to staff in all 20 nursing and residential homes in Richmond, as well as a pilot in Kingston.

“This was a huge opportunity to develop an innovative idea that might otherwise have been lost without SWLS support.”

Dr Catherine Millington-Sanders, *Difficult Conversations* Co-founder and Clinical Lead

The new training aimed to improve the quality and outcome of discussions with dementia patients in care homes by developing staff's awareness, confidence and communication skills in this area. The half day workshop of blended learning included information on the Mental Capacity Act, the communication framework SCARS (Setting, Communication, Ask, Reflect/Respond, Summarise), videos, role-playing exercises, and extensive feedback on individual performance.

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**‘Making best practice accepted practice’**

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“What we achieved was upskilling the multi-disciplinary workforce to improve the quality of dementia care delivered in a more patient-centred and compassionate way.” – Dr Catherine Millington-Sanders

#### Assessing Success and Embedding Learning

Although there are other contributory factors, feedback from care professionals has been very positive after the delivery of Difficult Conversation training, with many care homes requesting more training sessions. Evaluation of the workshops found:

- 98% of attendees as a result of having attended the course left feeling either confident (56%) or very confident (42%) at having difficult conversations with residents, families and carers.
- 100% of attendees as a result of having attended the course either somewhat agreed (6%) or highly agreed (91%) that their knowledge had improved.
- 100% of attendees as a result of having attended the course either somewhat agreed (27%) or highly agreed (73%) that their skills had improved.
- 100% of attendees felt that the training was either highly likely (94%) or somewhat

likely (6%) to improve their practice.

“As a GP, seeing the Difficult Conversations training in action, it is rewarding to see the impact it had on professionals. Regularly during the training you can see when it ‘clicks’ and you know there’s been a realisation for a professional of how they can improve their practice. For both the professionals and patient’s sake that’s quite inspiring for me.” – Dr Catherine Millington-Sanders

The team also realised that due to the use of agency nurses and high staff turnover in care homes they would need to embed the learning in the locality to ensure long lasting success. So as well as holding multiple training sessions at each care home the end of life care facilitator was available to help implement good practice throughout Richmond.

“It was about building those relationships. When the manager started to trust you and they saw how staff enjoyed the training, they’d always ask for you to come back.”

Comments from participants were very positive. For example: “I will be able to accommodate more the needs of the residents and communicate better with the family.” And “I learnt a lot of

things which I can practice in my daily routine at work.”

#### SWLS Support Expansion

As Difficult Conversations looked to expand SWLS were also able to offer advice and put them in touch with the individuals, organisations, and funding that would help them launch as an independent social enterprise. Since then Difficult Conversations has won the UnLtd Fast Growth Award for social enterprise development and the training has been endorsed by RCGP South London Faculty.

“It was great to have likeminded people from SWLS to support us and provide feedback in order to improve. For us it was brilliant and looking back invaluable to have had SWLS’s backing in order for us to grow from a tiny acorn in to a recognised training social enterprise.” – Dr Catherine Millington-Sanders

#### Small Grants, Lasting Impact

Small Grants is a programme that supports collaborative projects across academic, health and social care sectors. This is a unique programme in south west London, helping to promote innovation that could potentially be of great benefit for the population of the area and even beyond.

Could your idea be one of our next Small Grants beneficiaries? To find out more about SWLS Small Grants funding click here

To learn more about Difficult Conversations training click here



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