

Sports and exercise therapy for marginalised communities: graduate sports therapists in East London

Foundation Trust Mental Health and the British Transplant Games

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The number of people engaging with secondary mental health services in England is high and increasing, with a 10% rise from 3 256 695 (2021–2022) to 3 582 864 (2022–2023).¹ The prevalence of mental health issues is particularly high among younger demographics, with one in five children and young people aged 8–25 in England experiencing a probable mental health disorder.²

The incidence is even higher in certain demographics; for example, experiencing racism is linked to an increased likelihood of developing mental health disorders in minoritised ethnic groups.³ Additionally, transplant organ recipients are at higher risk of developing postoperative psychiatric conditions, with 23% having a psychiatric disorder.⁴

Sport, exercise and physical activity are effective therapeutic interventions that promote fitness and well-being, and significantly aid in managing long-term conditions like chronic pain and mental health disorders. However, young people with mental health disorders, and transplant organ recipients are two examples of groups frequently underserved within healthcare and Sport and Exercise Medicine (SEM).

In response to the need for equitable access to community-specific, therapeutic sport and exercise, graduate sports therapists (GSTs) identified solutions for two vulnerable groups—young persons with mental health conditions being treated as inpatients in the East London Foundation Trust (ELFT), and Transplant Sport athletes:

1. ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH AT ELFT

Antonette Garcia is a GST at ELFT's Adolescent Mental Health unit. Antonette identified that the complexity of young people's mental health conditions demands innovation and using her GST competencies designed a novel, structured physical activity-based health-care service. This therapeutic approach delivered a meaningful, engaging and sustainable experience, while strengthening relationships within the multidisciplinary team of psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, therapists, dieticians and social workers. What was initially 'prescribing exercises' at ELFT became holistic, person-centred, clinical sports and exercise therapy. Consequently, a new role for her as 'sports therapist' (rather than the previous 'fitness instructor') was developed. Antonette reported,

my motivation to integrate Sports and Exercise Therapy as central to physical and mental health in the inpatient units was realising that every young person could thrive in their recovery if they were guided and supported to enjoy physical activities, so long as their individual capabilities and unique interests were identified, and they were encouraged to be creative with movement.

Antonette is currently reviewing the service and 'hopes to share findings so that other National Health Service providers are inspired by ELFT's example'.

2. TRANSPLANT RECIPIENTS AND THE BRITISH TRANSPLANT GAMES

Up to a quarter of transplant organ recipients suffer from post-transplant mental health disorders, and the number receiving organ transplants in the UK has grown from 2600 (2009/2010) to 4533 (2022/2023).⁵ The Society of Sports Therapists (SST) recognised that more could be done to support access

to the benefits of safe physical activity, shown by trials to improve physical function, health-related quality of life, cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness.⁶ Consequently, the SST became official partners with Transplant Sport charity, supporting their mission to encourage all transplant recipients to be physically active and providing GSTs for the SEM care of post-transplant participants at the British Transplant Games (BTG), a celebration of life and sport. At the BTG, transplant recipients of all abilities, from 5 years old upwards, participate in over 25 different events, with some going on to compete at the World Transplant Games. Speaking after working with the 135 athlete-strong Great Britain and Northern Ireland Team at the 2023 World Transplant Games in Australia (figure 1), Thomas Hames (SST Member) and Sheila Ledington Wright (Honorary SST Member) said,

Transplant athletes really are very special people. They have been through life changing operations and have been given the gift of life. Each athlete will have their own unique physical and psychological demands which can often be quite different from dealing with an able-bodied athlete. It can be challenging but equally very inspiring and rewarding.

The SST is proud that its GST members are a key source of sports and exercise therapy support at the BTG, an event where a caring centred culture of social relations provides belonging, hope, motivation and a therapeutic space where individuals are more actively involved in their health than in the hospital or clinic.⁷ Within the multidisciplinary team, GSTs have been instrumental in facilitating and supporting a physically active health-promoting environment for this under-served community.

By spotlighting these services, we demonstrate that Physical Activity Healthcare Pathways for musculoskeletal (MSK) and mental health are enhanced by using degree-qualified, member-body regulated exercise therapy professionals, thereby helping to reduce healthcare inequalities and support the NHS's Long-Term Plan.

Using GSTs to engage people, especially vulnerable groups, in sport, therapeutic physical activity and exercise rehabilitation enhances their health and well-being. Despite their increased employment in the NHS, GSTs remain a largely 'untapped resource' in Physical

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Figure 1 Left to right: Psychologist Rebecca Mayne, SST Member Paddy Gaffey, Honorary SST Member Sheila Ledington Wright, SST Members Harry Pitt, Louise Anderson and Thomas Hames.

Activity Pathways and MSK healthcare services.

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Acknowledgements The authors acknowledge and thank Thomas Haines and Antonette Garcia for confirming the case-study information is correct and to the following for consenting to their inclusion in the image: Rebecca Mayne, Paddy Gaffey, Harry Pitt, Sheila Ledington Wright and Louise Anderson and Thomas Haines.

Contributors We affirm that all individuals listed as authors agree that they have met the criteria for authorship, agree to the conclusions of the piece, and that no individual meeting the criteria for authorship has been omitted. All authors were responsible for the conception of the work, content collection, drafting and critical revision of the article, and final approval of the version to be published.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests As volunteer Directors on the Board of The Society of Sports Therapists, each author wishes to declare this non-financial association/interest.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

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To cite Cole M, Owens J, Holland CJ. *Br J Sports Med* 2024;**58**:745–746.

Accepted 22 May 2024
Published Online First 30 May 2024

Br J Sports Med 2024;**58**:745–746.
doi:10.1136/bjsports-2024-108559

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