

Working together to enhance health in care homes

Airedale's speech and language therapist uses video technology to help prisoner to conquer stammer

A prisoner whose life has been transformed after receiving speech and language therapy via a secure video link shared his experience with members of Airedale Hospital's board at its meeting on May 25.

Mark, aged 45, who had a stammer for as long as he can remember told his story in public on screen about how seeking help through therapy was the best thing he had ever done.



Stephanie Burgess, speech and language therapist at Airedale NHS Foundation Trust, had 13 face-to-face sessions with him over nine months using telemedicine with the aim of helping him to have the confidence to talk to anyone without having to pick and choose.

Working with people in prison presents a greater challenge for therapists as it isn't a typical environment. It can be more difficult for prisoners to practise outside of the therapy sessions as usually people test out techniques on their family. However Mark proved that it is possible to make major changes though hard work and perseverance.

Initially Stephanie was apprehensive about using telemedicine as she thought there could be no substitute for personal contact. However, after using it a few times for her therapy work, she realised offering therapy sessions on screen was just as effective, in fact Mark told her he found it much less daunting than meeting in person.

Stephanie said: "I am so proud of what Mark has achieved. I saw a complete transformation in him, from the first session, when he was shaking and crying, looking down, covering his mouth and constantly switching his words, to the last session, when he was laughing and joking, stammering openly, telling me how happy he was to have been able to join in with a discussion about football and to have wished his daughter a happy birthday, and really wanting to get the word out about stammering."

Stephanie's approach is always tailored to the individual and to encourage people not to try





and hide their stammer but be open about it. Then to use a combination of offering practical techniques and tackling the psychological aspect to help them realise that others often won't judge them negatively. By the end of the sessions Mark no longer cared that he stammered and because he no longer worried, he didn't stammer as much.

Mark said: "One thing I always wanted to do was say happy birthday to my daughter over the phone, which I've always struggled to do. After speaking to my therapist about it, she told me to split the word down.

"The day I said it over the phone, my daughter was so surprised as that's the first time I've said it fully for twenty-two years, which made me so happy. I could not have done any of this without therapy and the excellent help and advice from my therapist. After forty plus years of stammering, I never thought I could ever stand in groups of people and join in conversations, or openly speak over the phone. With many thanks to my therapist I can."

As a result of this success, the British Stammering Association is looking into extending the use of telemedicine to patients in areas of the country where the local NHS Trust does not offer a speech therapy service to adults who stammer.

This includes the Airedale Speech and Language Therapy team mounting a joint bid with the charity to the Health Foundation to pilot our approach - using telemedicine - to enable more people to access this vital support to help them conquer the challenges created through stammering. ■