

LEADERSHIP AND RESEARCH  
SUMMER 1 REFLECTIVE REPORT

The opportunity to engage in a summer placement position at Maggie's Centres Newcastle was both engaging and challenging, providing equal parts education and experience in communicating about health. Maggie's is a non-profit organisation which tailors emotional, mental and financial advice towards people living with cancer and those who are affected by the person's diagnosis. Ultimately, the purpose of Maggie's is to continue to deliver additional support to cancer patients, working in conjunction with the physical treatment provided for patients at specialised cancer units in hospitals throughout the country.

Primarily, I was expected to begin my placement by building up a rapport with patients, enabling them to feel comfortable in my presence in order to ensure that their visit to the centre was reassuring and calming, in stark contrast to the often-overcrowded wards at the Freeman Hospital and the Royal Victoria Infirmary. This was admittedly daunting to me, as I had previously no experience in conversing with people in a hospital environment, therefore requiring me to experiment with the tone of voice and language I used. Over time, my choice of language, and thus my confidence, developed and matured, enabling me to feel self-assured in my ability to direct a conversation with a vast range of visitors, such as terminally ill patients or bereaved children. This development of conversational skills reflected positively in the relationships I fostered with patients, many of whom were regular visitors to the centre who I frequently and fruitfully engaged in discussion with regarding their diagnosis, their emotions surrounding their cancer and their wider relationships. Following the conclusion of my placement, I continue to remember and appreciate the meaningful conversations I engaged in and perpetuate the communication skills I developed over the summer.

Additionally, my problem-solving and perception abilities were drastically enriched by the placement programme, providing me with enduring skills which I will value during my studies and future employment. There were many challenging and complex situations which occurred during my time at the centre due to a range of varying factors, including the advanced ages of some of the patients and the consequential complications of aging diseases such as dementia. One particular instance involved a patient with head and neck cancer who was transported from a care home with an inexperienced carer who was unaware of his needs. Thus, additional requirements were asked of me, including locating specific feeding supplies and articulating information to the man in a clear and accessible manner. My problem-solving abilities were required in this situation in order to extract information from the man regarding his feeding needs; ultimately, both time and care were required in order to achieve this and to prevent the patient from feeling overwhelmed and therefore uncomfortable with his experience at Maggie's. Moreover, communication issues further allowed my problem-solving skills to be developed, as there were often patients who were too emotionally overwhelmed to coherently express their needs. Through their clear emotional distress, it was often necessary to evaluate the patient as requiring stage 2 of the psychological assessment and support criteria outlined by the NICE Guidance on Oncology and Palliative Care (2004), implying that primary screening was required for psychological distress by

healthcare professionals with additional expertise, such as the Cancer Support Specialist nurses. Thus, my increased ability to evaluate the patients' needs further enabled my problem-solving skills to be enhanced as I successfully aided in resolving emotional distress.

Largely, the placement programme has allowed me to develop and enrich my understanding of physical healthcare, as the psychological and emotional support provided by Maggie's was closely intertwined with the physical treatments navigated by the hospital. Over time, I learnt to recognise the key features of certain diagnoses from the physical appearances of many of the patients and the vague symptoms they described, such as the presence of a PEG tube for mouth cancer and the symptom of bloating for ovarian cancer. Additionally, I learnt to integrate the medical terms used into my conversational dialect, such as describing the cancer as curative or non-curative based on the staging and grading of the diagnosis. Overall, the placement enabled me to apply some of the knowledge acquired through my degree regarding cancer to a practical environment.

In amalgamation, my time at Maggie's was both informative and compelling, showing the dynamic equilibrium between physical and mental healthcare. Through the multifaceted conversations in the emotional wellbeing workshops, I learnt that 60 percent of cancer patients find the mental challenges of cancer abundantly harder than the physical: many patients expressed feelings of isolation, distress, and suicidal ideation. This only further elucidated to me the necessity for psychological support in holistic cancer care, including the workshops and classes I attended at Maggie's which markedly aided the mental wellbeing of many patients, learnt through post-workshop evaluations. Ultimately, the immeasurable importance of multidimensional cancer care has been made clear, which I will further assess next summer through systematic review protocols of one of the workshops.