

Sheltering from the storm:  
a story about knowledge sharing in a  
community health & social care team



by Vicky Ward

with illustrations by  
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This story is based on data collected by observing the work of a community health and social care team during an independent research project funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The characters named in the story are fictional and not based on any one individual.

Special thanks go to Rosemary Bayford, Lynne Carter, Sarah Edwards, Tessa Holmes, Joe Langley, Anne McGee, Alison Powell, Marie Walker and David Woodcock for their help with analysing the data and producing this story.

The materials contained in this booklet are free to use, but please contact me if you wish to do so. For more information about the project and how to get in touch please see the back page of this booklet.

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This story is about the Oakview community health and social care team. The team is made up of lots of different health and social care professionals like nurses, social workers and physiotherapists. Their job is to work together to look after people living in the local community. This is the story of what their knowledge sharing looks like.

The story is designed to illustrate a number of lessons about how groups of people share knowledge. At these points you will find a box containing a short commentary and some questions which could be used to encourage knowledge sharing. At the end of the story you will find a short summary of these lessons and some further details about the questions.



This is Heather. She works with members of the Oakview team to look after people living in the local community.

Heather and her colleagues often feel overwhelmed by the context they are working in. Lots of the people they look after are very poorly, very unhappy and living in poverty. Some of them loudly refuse the help and support that Heather and her colleagues try to offer. It's easy for the team to feel a bit out of their depth.



Dealing with multiple challenges and issues can make it difficult for groups of people to prioritise what they need to know and how to access that knowledge. Questions to help include “what is the biggest issue?” and “what do we need to know?”

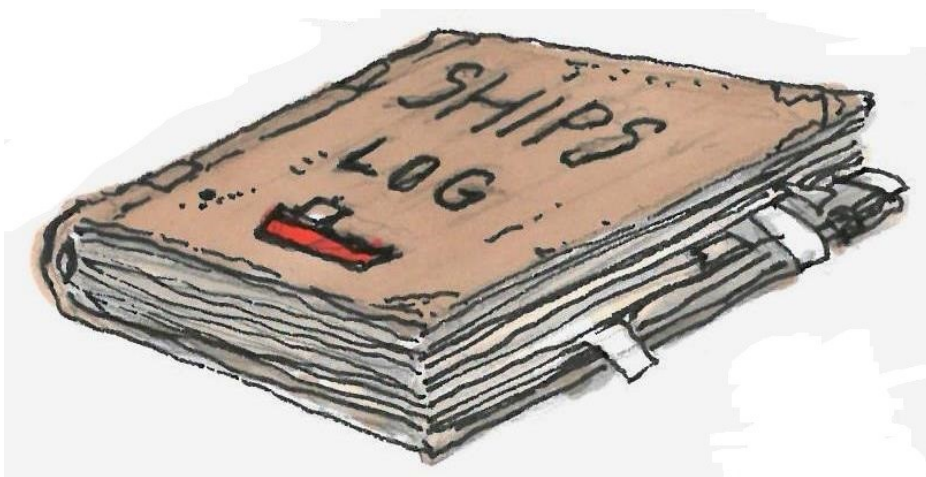


Every week Heather meets with her colleagues to talk about the people they are looking after. These meetings are a great place for Heather to get support from her colleagues and to get a reprieve from the difficult situations she is dealing with.

It's not always easy to make it to the meeting and Heather often finds herself scrambling in at the last minute. But once she's there she usually finds she doesn't want to be anywhere else because it's such a good and supportive place to be.

Supportive, safe spaces are an important setting for groups of people to share knowledge (including their uncertainties, concerns and ideas) with one another. Questions to help foster a supportive atmosphere include "what are we worried about?" and "what do we feel about this issue?"





There's something else that needs to make it to the meeting before Heather and her colleagues can start to share knowledge. This is a folder that contains notes about all of the people that have been talked about in previous meetings. If the folder isn't there for any reason the team find it difficult to remember who they need to talk about and what they have already agreed to do.

Groups of people often rely on documents as a way of capturing and summarising knowledge. Some knowledge (like thoughts and experiences) is difficult to write down and needs to be accessed in other ways. Questions to help include "how do we capture what we know?" and "how do we share what we know?"

When everyone has made it to the meeting, Heather can focus on sharing knowledge and information with her colleagues.



Most of the knowledge that gets shared is about the individuals listed in the folder. Although this comes from different places Heather has noticed that the most important knowledge always comes from someone's direct experiences of seeing the person they are talking about. Heather knows that if she shares this kind of knowledge it will always be listened to and taken on board by her colleagues.

Direct experiences are a powerful and important source of knowledge. These can override valuable knowledge and information from other sources which could inspire groups of people to develop new ideas and solutions. Questions to help include "what do other people affected by the issue think?", "what do we know about how to address this issue?" and "have we dealt with a similar situation before?"



As well as sharing what they have seen, Heather and her colleagues also share their concerns and worries about the people they have visited. Sometimes Heather's concerns are so strong that one of her colleagues will quickly offer to take their own knowledge and expertise out to the person she is worried about.

Unease and uncertainty (Heather's concerns and worries) are a vital starting point for sharing knowledge and often encourage people to contribute their knowledge and expertise to a discussion. It can be difficult for groups of people to talk about their uncertainties. A question which could help is "what are we worried about?"





Although there is often an air of calm competence at the meetings, things don't always go smoothly.

Sometimes discussions seem to go off at a bit of a tangent and Heather isn't sure what knowledge is being shared or why. And often her colleagues are so full of questions about the person they are discussing or ideas to try that Heather feels that she is being bombarded. She finds it difficult to handle so many questions and suggestions without feeling swamped and a bit inadequate, even though she knows her colleagues are just trying to help.

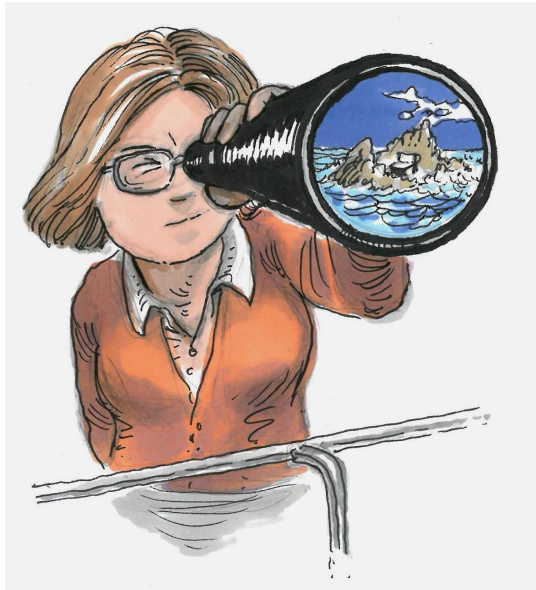
Curiosity is an important part of how people share knowledge and why they get involved in sharing knowledge. Groups of people are sometimes so curious and keen to share ideas that they share too much. This makes it difficult to receive, make sense of and use what is being shared. Questions to help include "what do we need to know to move forward?" and "how do we use what we know to develop a solution?"





Heather has also noticed how difficult it is for her and her colleagues to bring other people's knowledge into their discussions. It sometimes feels risky to bring in perspectives from other professionals in case they interrupt the relationships Heather and her colleagues have built with the people they are discussing.

Different perspectives are important when groups of people are dealing with challenging situations (like how to help someone with complex needs). It can be difficult for groups of people to receive this type of knowledge. Questions to help include "who do we need to listen to?" and "who else might know something about this situation?"



Although Heather knows that there is probably other knowledge that might help her and her colleagues to feel less out of their depth, it all feels a bit distant and difficult to access.

If the knowledge isn't directly about the person they are discussing it's difficult for Heather to see how it might help or to have the motivation to go looking for it.



Knowledge from elsewhere can be a valuable source of inspiration and ideas when groups of people are trying to work out how to deal with a challenging situation (like how to help someone with complex needs). It can be difficult for groups of people to look for this type of knowledge . A question to help is “has anyone else dealt with a similar situation?”

This story has illustrated a number of important lessons about knowledge sharing. In summary, the Oakview team are able to share knowledge with each other because they have created a safe, supportive space for sharing knowledge and are able to share their uncertainties and worries with each other. They are also curious and interested in one another's work and willing to contribute knowledge from their own experiences.

The team also faces a number of challenges when trying to share knowledge. The complex setting that they work in makes it difficult for them to identify what they need to know and to use that knowledge. It is also difficult for team members to receive different perspectives and to access and use knowledge from elsewhere.

One way of dealing with these and other challenges is to ask questions like those shown in the boxes on the previous pages. These questions have been designed to help groups of people to share knowledge when they are dealing with difficult situations where there are no clear answers (such as how to help someone with complex needs). The questions focus on helping groups of people to think and talk about their main area of concern, what they do and don't know and how they will access and use knowledge to address the situation they are dealing with.

For details of where you can find out more about these knowledge sharing questions please turn the page.

## About the author

Vicky Ward is an academic from the University of St Andrews. Her work focuses on how people share knowledge with each other and how they can be supported to do so.

Between October 2014 and November 2016 she looked at how knowledge was shared during case management meetings in community health and social care teams. She also developed and tested a set of questions designed to help these teams to share knowledge.

To find out more about the project and download resources please visit

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