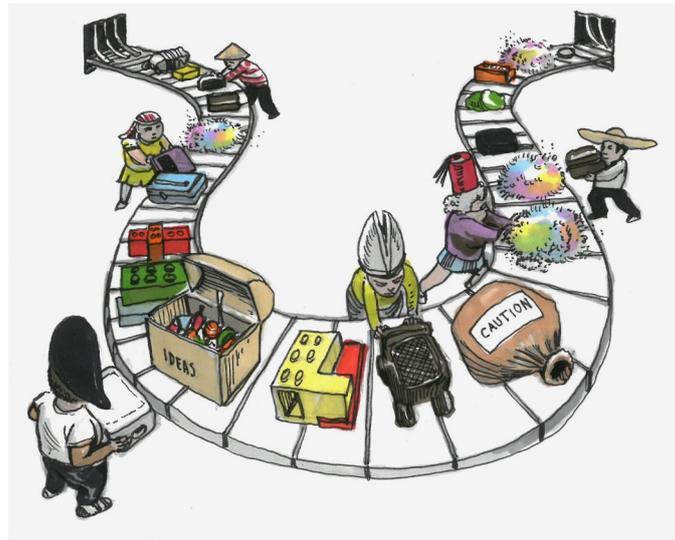


Dealing with the carousel of
knowledge:
a story about knowledge sharing in a
community health & social care team



by Vicky Ward

with illustrations by
James McKay

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 Neal Beckwith, Tessa Holmes, Joe Langley, Zane Linde-Ozola, Janine Morton, Alison Powell, David Woodcock and Mohammed Zaman for their help with analysing the data and producing this story.

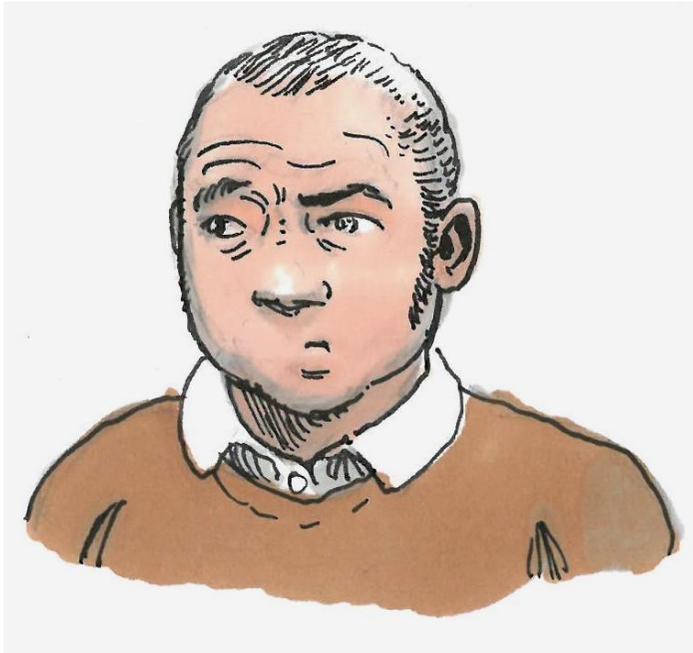
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This story is about the Beechcroft community health and social care team. The team is made up of lots of different health and social care professionals like nurses, social workers and physiotherapists. Their job is to work together to look after people 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 Adam. Adam is a member of the Beechcroft team and he helps to look after people living in the local area.

One of the people that Adam is looking after is Mary. She has lots of health and other problems and recently Adam has started to worry about her. Some of his worries are quite big and specific, but others are smaller and more of a nagging feeling.



Each week Adam meets with his colleagues to talk about the people they are looking after, and he decides that this would be a good place to talk about his worries about Mary.

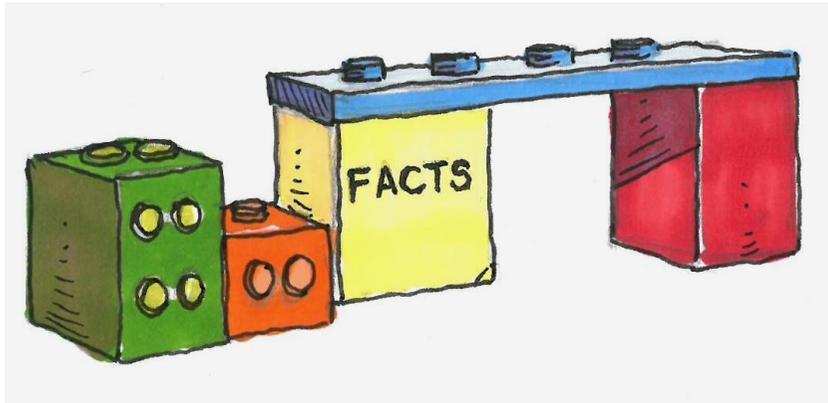
Unease and uncertainty (Adam's worries) are a vital starting point for sharing knowledge. These can be difficult for groups of people to admit and talk about. A question which could help is "what are we worried about?"

Everyone who comes to the meeting wears different hats and they all have different roles and knowledge.

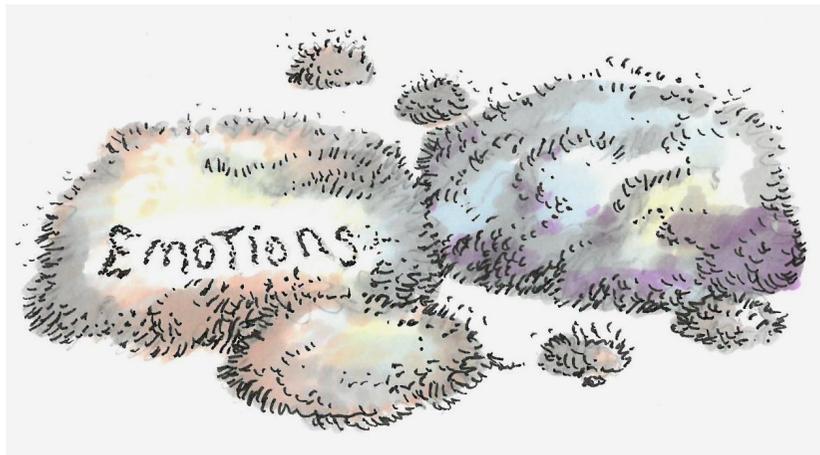
Adam knows that his colleagues will all be interested in Mary and curious about his worries and her problems. This usually means that they will ask lots of questions and be keen to share their knowledge and ideas. Even people who aren't officially at the meeting will probably come over to join in if they know Mary and hear Adam talking about her.



Curiosity is an important part of how people share knowledge and why they get involved in sharing knowledge. Asking lots of questions demonstrates curiosity and questions can also encourage curiosity and learning, especially if they include words like 'why' and 'how'.

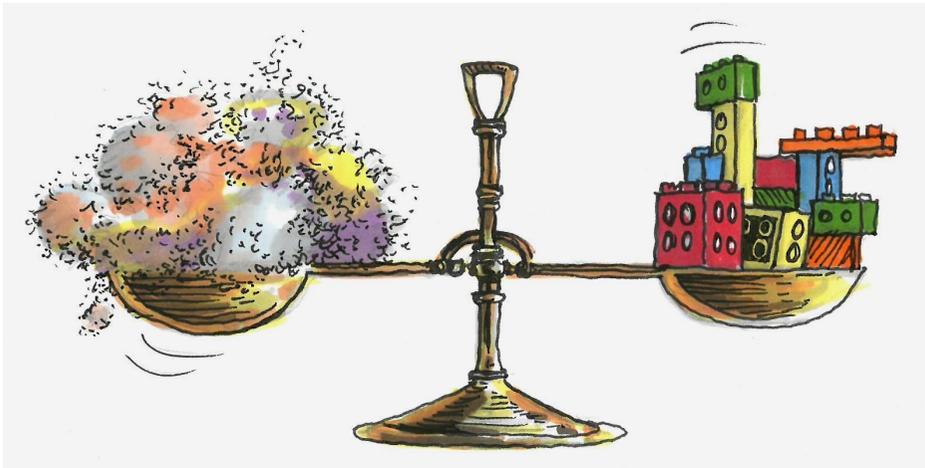


When they start talking about Mary, Adam and his colleagues share 2 sorts of knowledge. They share factual things about her health conditions, living conditions, treatment and other support she has received. And they also share emotional things like how they think the situation is affecting Mary and how they feel about what is going on.

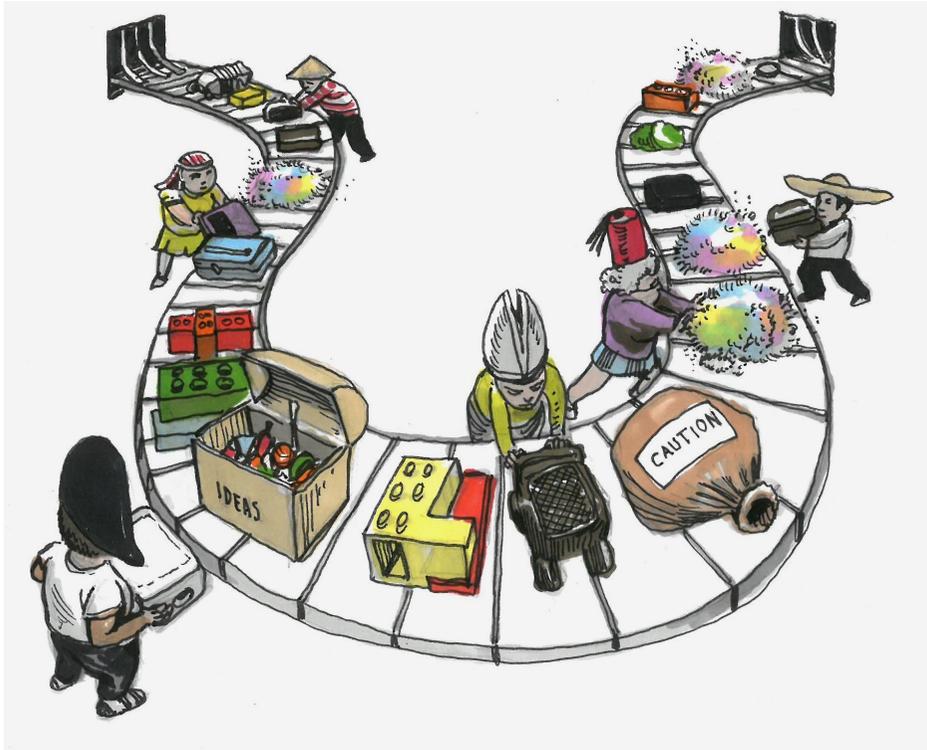


Knowledge comes in lots of different forms and being able to share all of these is important when groups of people are trying to work out what's best in an uncertain situation (like Mary's). It can be difficult for groups of people to share emotions and feelings and to recognise how important these are. Questions to help include "what do we think or feel about the situation?" and "what do other people think or feel about the situation?"

Adam has noticed that it's often difficult to bring the two together when they talk about people like Mary. When they talk about the facts, these crowd out their emotions, but when they talk about their emotions, these crowd out the facts. It's a tricky balancing act.



Although different forms of knowledge are valuable, it can be difficult to bring these together. One way of dealing with this is for groups to identify and prioritise the knowledge that they need. Questions which could help are “what is the problem we need to address?”, “what do we need to know to move forward?” and “how do we use what we know?”



As they carry on talking about Mary, more and more knowledge starts circulating round the room. It's like there's a luggage carousel full of knowledge that Adam might need. Facts, emotions, information and ideas all get put onto the carousel. Some of it doesn't seem relevant, but at least anyone feels free to add anything.

It starts to get difficult to see what's there, or to know what's important, and before long the same knowledge keeps going round and round without being picked up. Adam knows that if they are going to spot the knowledge that might help Mary, everyone is going to have to start listening to each other.

Groups of people are sometimes so keen to share knowledge and ideas that they struggle to listen to each other and share too much. This makes it difficult to make sense of and use what is being shared. Questions to help include “what is the biggest issue?”, “what do we need to know?” and “who do we need to listen to?”



Some of the knowledge that Adam and his colleagues share has been built up over years and years of looking after people like Mary. When they spot the similarities they are really able to make use of that knowledge. These kind of flashbulb moments spark things off and before long everyone is starting to make connections between the knowledge circulating round the room.

Even the knowledge that seemed a bit irrelevant ends up being taken off the carousel and connected with other knowledge.

Previous experience is a valuable source of knowledge and can help groups of people work out what to do in uncertain situations (like Mary's). It can be difficult for groups of people to identify the similarities between those experiences and the situation they are facing now. A question to help is "have we dealt with a similar situation before?"



There's another kind of knowledge on the carousel, but it's one that Adam and his colleagues don't like to talk about even though they share it all the time. This is how to get things done by working around things in the system that make it difficult to help people like Mary.

Adam always feels a bit awkward admitting that this is what he's doing in case it looks like he's taking advantage of his colleagues or not following the rules.

Sometimes people are reluctant to share knowledge, especially if it seems to go against procedures and rules. But this type of practical knowledge can be very valuable when groups are dealing with uncertain or difficult situations. A question that could help people to discuss this kind of knowledge is “what do we usually do about this type of situation?”



The way that Adam and his colleagues talk about Mary and her problems hasn't been particularly structured, and when they get to the end of the discussion, Adam isn't entirely sure who is going to do what. But he now knows that there is a lot of potential to make things happen and get Mary the help that she needs and he feels fairly confident that things will start to work out.

Adam has also realised how easy it can be to forget how much he knows and is sharing what he knows with his colleagues when it's just part of how they all work together.

When groups of people share knowledge with each other the outcomes of their discussions often seem invisible and sometimes the link between what they share and what they do seems weak. A question that could help is “how do we use what we know to develop a solution?”

This story has illustrated a number of important lessons about knowledge sharing. In summary, the Beechcroft team are able to share knowledge with one another because they are able to admit that they are worried and uncertain about the people they are looking after and how to help them. They are also curious and encourage one another's curiosity by asking questions and sharing different types of knowledge. They are able to share and use knowledge best when they identify patterns in their work and experiences.

The team also face a number of challenges when trying to share knowledge. Some types of knowledge are more difficult to share and they find it difficult to balance the different types of knowledge they are sharing. They also find it difficult to prioritise, make sense of and use the knowledge that is being shared.

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 best to help someone like Mary). 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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