Evaluating the acceptability and feasibility of conducting a RCT to test the efficacy of a dental anxiety/phobia online support group

Section 1 – Project Details:

Rationale:

Dental anxiety/phobia is both an individual and public health problem. The latest UK Adult Dental Health Survey shows that 36% of the respondents have moderate dental anxiety, with 12% indicating severe clinically significant anxiety (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2010). Individuals who are anxious are significantly less likely to attend a general dental practitioner and have poorer oral health than those without anxiety.

As oral health deteriorates this can have a profound effect on sufferers’ social relationships, and they often experience sleep disturbance, negative physiological impact and decreased vitality (Cohen et al., 2000; Mehrstedt et al., 2002; Oosterink et al., 2009). Individuals with dental anxiety are more likely to wait until their dental health becomes so poor that they need to access expensive, lengthy and invasive treatment via emergency secondary care. This is costly for the NHS, and also compounds these patients’ anxiety thus continuing on the ‘vicious cycle’ of fear. There is clearly a need for intervention. However, the limited services that are available for dentally anxious individuals vary regionally and are resource-intensive; they also tend to suffer from patient drop-out as patients often need to attend a dental clinic to access the intervention.

Online support groups (OSGs) have become a popular source of information, advice and support for individuals living with a range of health conditions, including anxieties and phobias. Our previous research has shown that patients report their anxiety has reduced from accessing these groups with most individuals finding the experience of these groups both positive and beneficial. They report that they feel understood, less alone and more empowered to conquer their fear (Buchanan & Coulson, 2007; Coulson & Buchanan, 2008). Therefore, these groups may represent a free, convenient and beneficial tool to assist individuals to confront their dental anxiety/phobia and gain support from others with the same fear. Ultimately, we would like to investigate whether these groups can help anxious people reduce their anxiety and access a regular dentist by randomising them into an OSG vs control group in a controlled trial. However, before we do this we need to explore the acceptability and feasibility of undertaking such a trial. This forms the basis for the PhD proposal.

Aims and methodology:

This PhD project aims to explore the extent to which it is feasible and acceptable to conduct a RCT to test the efficacy of an established dental anxiety/phobia online support group for reducing anxiety to a clinically acceptable level and facilitating regular dental attendance.

This PhD will involve a mixed methods feasibility and acceptability study to help inform a main trial. Dentally anxious individuals would be recruited into an existing dental OSG (which we have used previously in our research). Baseline and follow-up data would be collected on relevant psychological and oral health indicators to be informed by the research literature and PPI member. At the end of the intervention period we would conduct in-depth interviews with two groups – one group who did not access the dental OSG and
one who regularly accessed it/participated in order to assess the acceptability of the intervention and the barriers that prevented full engagement. Acceptability and feasibility of the recruitment strategy will also be explored alongside attrition rate. As this is a feasibility study we will not evaluate efficacy of the intervention but we will pilot the measures and time-points. Feasibility and acceptability of the self-report measures will also be evaluated in participant interviews.

**Benefits and suitability as a PhD project:**

This PhD employs mixed methods in a project that would enable the candidate to develop a variety of skills and experience. It tackles an original and topical research question and as such would be likely to produce high quality outputs. It is designed to be deliverable in three years and has the benefit of having the balance of structured methods alongside room for input from the PhD candidate. It brings together the research expertise of the two supervisors. Professor Coulson is an international expert on online research methods and has published extensively on OSGs. Dr Buchanan is an international expert on the assessment and management of dental anxiety. They have previously successfully supervised PhD students together and have published a number of jointly authored articles on OSGs and dental anxiety/phobia.

**Key References:**


**Section 2 – Training Provision:**

The successful student will be supported through a tailored training programme which will extend across years 1 to 3 of the PhD. The student will have access to the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Training Programme and be able to choose relevant short courses following a detailed skills analysis at the start of each year of registration. In addition, the successful student will be located in the centre for Doctoral Training in Rehabilitation and Healthcare Research. Through membership of this centre, the student will undertake the 2 day core training module in complex interventions and mixed methods research. This courses introduces students to the MRC Framework for evaluating complex interventions, helps them to appreciate the value of mixed method designs in rehabilitation research and the factors important in their delivery and provides a unique opportunity to learn from experts (members of academic and research staff in the Division of Rehabilitation and Ageing and School of Health Sciences) who will share their practical experience of measuring complex interventions.