

NHS Counselling Service

BY SUE MONCKTON-RICKETT

As the NHS Counselling Service draws to a close with the final session being held at the end of November there is so much to give thanks for.

Thinking back to March 2020, we would like to give thanks for:

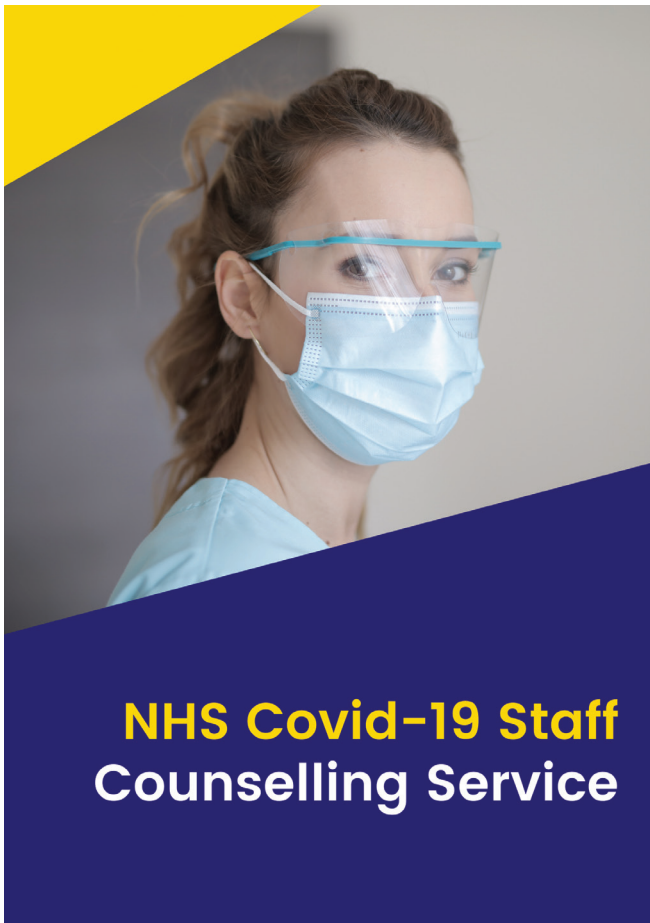
- Elaine Bennett who believing that God had spoken to her about supporting NHS staff approached ACC to see "what we could do? / how could we respond to Covid-19?"
- ACC Board, who met just a few days after the national lockdown was announced and believed that God was indeed calling us to set-up a counselling service, agreed to ACC staff using time to do it and continued to support the service throughout
- The many people, who gave their time, experience and skills to develop the service – put in place all the documentation (safeguarding policies, referral forms, information leaflets, counsellor application forms, etc.), recruit 200 counsellors, build a database, develop a process and system, advertise the service, put together a library of resources, etc.
- The 200+ counsellors, 7 case managers, supervisors and 2 service coordinators who volunteered and worked for 9 months on a completely voluntary basis and ACC staff who put in many extra hours

The efforts of all of these people meant that within a month the ACC Crisis Counselling Support Service (CCSS) was established offering up to 10 no fee sessions to anyone working in the NHS who were directly impacted by Covid-19, residential care home staff, and anyone who had been bereaved during the pandemic.

Initially, we had no obvious way into the NHS and we were relying on personal contacts, churches, ACC members, etc. to make the service known. Then God opened the door to contact a senior member of staff at NHS Well-Being, who happened to also be a Christian and the service started to be publicised directly within the NHS. In addition, God also opened the door to enable us to work directly with a branch of MIND, who referred bereaved clients that they were supporting to the service.

After 9 months the service had provided counselling amazingly to 259 clients (126 NHS staff, 126 bereaved and 7 care home staff), who were provided with a total of 1,850 sessions of counselling. However, as a Board we felt this totally voluntary service could not continue indefinitely and we informed the NHS and MIND. To our great surprise and God being at work, the NHS said that they valued the service so much that they would provide funding, enabling ACC to pay those working on the service.

So, version 2 of the service was launched in February 2021 and was called "NHS Covid-19 Staff Counselling Service". This time it was just for NHS staff working in hospital settings, and paramedics who were, or had been, working with Covid-19 patients and offered up to 8 sessions. The relaunch involved changing all of the documentation, confirming with all of the counsellors that they were happy to continue, adapting some of the process, etc. The NHS provided funding in tranches and each time we got near to the end of a tranche we wondered if that



NHS Covid-19 Staff Counselling Service

would be it and we would have to close the service, but each time more funding was found, meaning that we were able to provide another 650 counselling sessions to 102 NHS staff.

As we approached Easter 2022, ACC were asked to provide an evaluation report and it felt like the service may be coming to a close with the number of staff working directly with Covid patients decreasing and the NHS emphasis seeming to move elsewhere. We prepared to close, but again we believe that God intervened and the NHS Well-Being team came to us with a new proposal. They had seen the value of the service and the quality of how it was run and the counselling provided. They had also started to understand the importance for some staff of having counselling from a totally independent organisation and with a counsellor who understands and will work, if requested with issues of faith. This time the service was made available to all patient facing clinical and non-clinical NHS staff, not just those who were or had worked with Covid-19 patients. Again, the relaunch, which we had to turn around within a month, involved work to make adaptations and a slightly adapted name "ACC NHS Staff Counselling Service".

This final version (version 3) of the scheme ran from June 2022 to the end of November, when the final client has finished their sessions. In this time the service provided another 1,055 sessions to 174 NHS staff.

Unfortunately, in Spring of 2023, it became obvious that there would be no more funding, the approach of the NHS in relation to staff well-being was changing completely – the NHS Well-Being Hubs, from whom many clients were referred were disbanded along with the central Well-Being Team, who we had worked with closely and supported us so faithfully.

It was sad that the service had to close, but equally we want to celebrate a service that continued, to our amazement, for 3 ½ years. In that time 535 people, bereaved people and NHS staff have been supported through some of the most traumatic events of their lives and been provided with 3,555 counselling sessions. It no doubt provided personal benefit to them, but also in doing so for many it has been part of the support that has enabled them to continue to work, or return to work, and so contribute to the vital service of the NHS throughout the pandemic and beyond. Just a couple of quotes from client feedback (which on average scored 9.8 out of 10) shows how much the service was valued:

- The service was offered in a timely manner and was extremely valuable, helping me to get through the pandemic. It allowed me to process past issues and worries as well as to focus and reflect on how the Covid crisis was affecting me. Having a faith counsellor was also very important and allowed me to discuss issues like belief and trust in God.
- I was in a dark hole, my counsellor with a lot of kindness led me to the light. She helped me to understand my journey and to look at different paths I could take.

Not only did clients benefit from the service, but we know that for many of those working for the service it felt a privilege to use their skills, training and experience to actively support the bereaved and NHS staff at a time of crisis and beyond. ACC also benefitted from providing this service; we became more known and valued by the NHS, we have raised awareness and been able to have conversations about the importance for many of faith as part of their well-being and we have a proven system of providing counselling as a central body that we can adapt for other settings.

At the start of this article, we gave thanks for everyone who was involved at the beginning of the service, but our thanks also go to those counsellors who joined during the various stages of the scheme, to NHS Well-Being team who repeatedly found funding and promoted the service, to new ACC staff who have managed the service and most importantly to God from whom the initial inspiration came and who has sustained it throughout.

The service started with the questions 'what can we do?' and 'how do we respond?' The answer reminds me of the "Feeding of the 5,000", we sacrificially bring what we have to God and allow Him to do the rest.

My thanks to everyone who was willing to do this.