Purpose

The purpose of the Omega course in late 2020 is to urgently address the needs of the population for information, comfort, preparedness and skills to face the sudden reality of our mortality that Covid 19 is impressing upon us so vividly. We have a proven model of public health education to the premorbid population: The Omega Course. We have the opportunity to take our course online and roll out Advance Care planning to the population. Advance Care Planning is most important for those not knowingly dying but they are the hardest people for medical services and hospices to reach. Covid 19 can cause a rapid demise in its second week and hospitalised patients requiring ventilation have rarely had the chance to think or discuss their end of life wishes. The Omega Course addresses the problem that during the Covid 19 pandemic only 4% of people dying in hospital during the first wave had Advance Care Plans. GPs were identifying patients they believed may die if they contracted Covid 19 to discuss resuscitation plans over the phone. Review articles advise that there is an urgent need for advance care planning in the community with currently well people [1]. This is exactly what The Omega Course does, but is impeded from doing by having only 2 facilitators and working with small groups, which is not possible during the pandemic. We are a small organisation, set up in 2016, that exists to address the taboo around death and dying so that people are ready and prepared to know their wishes prior to becoming ill. Our public health education course 'The Omega Course' was set up in Kenilworth with small grant funding from Warwickshire District Council, Kenilworth town council, Kenilworth Round Table and personal donations. We have 2 main aims. Firstly to help people feel more comfortable about the fact they will die, and secondly because they are more comfortable to teach communication skills so they are brave enough to talk to people about death dying and bereavement. This avoids the dying and bereaved being given the cold shoulder. COURSE

CONTENT

The Omega Course content defuses fear of talking about death, helps people plan for the time they have left by looking at their bucket list, and informs them how to plan ahead so their last wishes are known and can be put into action, even if they can no longer speak for themselves because they have lost mental capacity. Towards the end of the course we teach communication skills using role play so that our attendees are able to talk confidently to other people who are worried, ill or who have lost someone they love. At the end of the course we cover how to help bereaved people. The overall aim is to upskill our local people to live confidently because they are prepared for their own death. Looking at these issues enables people to be compassionate to help others effectively when ill or bereaved. Our place in the market is to the population prior to diagnosis of any serious illness. Of course it can be applicable at any stage thereafter up to death but to live life to the full, putting one's house in order is most effective when one has the emotional space to think and plan, not when one is coping with symptoms, investigations, diagnoses and the consequences thereof.

COURSE HISTORY

We started by running courses 3 times a year, in March, June and September, in Kenilworth, Warwickshire. Our confidence grew after a successful evaluation of our first 6 courses by Warwick University which found the course to be enjoyable, informative and effective meeting its aims. We applied for charitable status and were awarded it in May 2019. We have confidence in the efficacy of The Omega Course because our evaluation follows Kirkpatrick's four levels of training evaluation [2]:

Each participant completes a ‘Before and After’ self-assessment evaluation and qualitative comments. These are really encouraging and uniformly favourable

In 2018 two Warwick University Medical Students undertook a research evaluation of The Omega Course outcomes. The research was independent and ethically scrutinised by the Biomedical & Scientific Research Ethics Committee (BSREC) of the University. Using a Qualtrics survey both qualitative and quantitative responses were analysed. The results indicate a very positive response. Attendees can think and talk about their own death, plan for the, future, feel more confident discussing death with someone else and have more conversations about death and dying. they are less afraid of dying after the course. The Omega Course meets its objectives and changes the abilities and forward planning of the participants. These results have been accepted at West Midlands conferences as well as National Hospice(UK) and International European Association for Palliative Care conferences [3, 4].

NARRATIVE COURSE FEEDBACK

What people have said after attending the course:

“I thought it would be quite morbid but has been surprising that we laughed a lot.”

“Challenging, but well worth spending the time confronting the inevitable in order to become better prepared.”

“The Omega Course is a must for anyone that will die.”

OMEGAPRO

The Royal College of Physicians published a paper in 2018 outlining why clinicians find it hard to talk to patients about dying [5]. Reasons include a lack of confidence from not having addressed their own mortality and so being inhibited in discussion of the topic. Confronting one's own mortality is one of the things The Omega Course does well so we took courage and designed and ran 2 OmegaPRO courses for senior clinical nurse specialists in January and February 2020. The course evaluated very well and specifically mentioned the challenge of thinking about one's own death.

THE NEED TO DELIVER ONLINE OMEGA COURSES

Covid 19 restrictions have meant we have been unable to run courses this year, sadly just when the very thing we do is most needed. The Omega course addresses directly the problem that during the Covid 19 pandemic 96% of people dying in hospital had no Advance Care Plan to indicate their wishes to the medical teams. Relatives who may have known more and spoken for them were not allowed to go in ambulances or onto emergency department premises. This lack of readiness and planning is particularly sad when no advocate can be by your side.

Covid 19 has accelerated our requirement for online training courses but we need support to achieve it. We only have 2 volunteer facilitators. Both highly trained and experienced in their fields, one a palliative medicine trained doctor and psychotherapist, the other a probation officer and life coach. What we now require is funding for technical support and online training; online teaching and course development; a marketing strategy; graphics for online workbooks and activities; video copyright payment; and software programmes, apps and an internet host. A serious limitation is that we have no administrative support. We need funding to grow after a very successful pilot period. We do have a website under construction.

OUTCOME

The Warwickshire population and the medical/clinical staff caring for them would be helped by the training we can deliver. It would help in clinical consultations and ease the minds of those worrying about how to prepare for hospitalisation and worse. Mental wellbeing is enhanced by planning life in the face of death and the omega course will help promote mental wellbeing across the County. The course attendees would also be better relatives friends and neighbours by learning the communications skills we teach and becoming part of the Omega compassionate community project.

WARWICKSHIRE FOCUS

Previous grants have been for local courses aimed to lay an infrastructure for a compassionate community in our town and its environs, but we have accepted people from Coventry. Now with online courses we could focus our marketing strategy to Warwickshire for community development whilst offering the other benefits to a much wider audience. Fees will be kept reasonable but we hope to move towards being self-supporting at the end of 2 years online.

FUNDING

We will be pursuing funding for the following. If interested to support our work please donate using the button on the home page of the website.

1. Mentoring for online course production which is available and effective and can be accessed fast. The best packages include planning both the course and the marketing strategy.

2. Computer software programmes for online course production, handbook templates, and webinar delivery

3. Host platform

4. Technical support for set up locally and on-going support

5. Admin support 10 hours a week

6. Computer, monitor, and sundry equipment (at present facilitators use personal equipment)

7. Local marketing budget

SUMMARY

We already have the proof of concept for our course and outcomes. We can develop quickly but what we now need, in a hurry, is to be able to scale up delivery using modern tools and techniques. The timescale has to be short to meet the needs of those who are going to become caught up in the second wave of the Covid 19 pandemic. It is however true that death and dying will be an issue for everyone, even after Covid 19 has a solution. 100% of people born in each year, will die. We have a duty to help them be ready, and to die well, so they can live well until they do die.

REFERENCES

[1] Advance care planning in the community in the context of COVID-19. August 18, 2020 The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine develops, promotes and disseminates better evidence for healthcare.

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[3] P-5 The omega course-tackling the death taboo. Isabel Hiskett, Ieuan Davies and Chantal Meystre. <https://spcare.bmj.com/content/9/Suppl_4/A11.2>

[4] What is Difficult in Talking to Friends and Relatives About Dying: Do Clinical Communication Training Methods Help Community Members? Analysis of The Omega Course Communication training Day. Colin Briffa and Chantal Meystre, EAPC Abstracts Palliative Medicine. May 21, 2019 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269216319844405>

[5] RCP Report October 2018 Talking About Dying

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