How technology can be used to enhance the therapeutic impact of seclusion: preliminary feedback on a ‘Cowall’ installation

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Background
Providers of forensic mental health services are working hard to review and reduce the use of restrictive practices such as seclusion. However, in some circumstances, seclusion remains an important ‘last resort’ measure and provides severely disturbed or violent patients with nursing care in a safer, low-stimulus environment.

Seclusion suites should allow medical staff to communicate effectively with the patient even when the door is locked, however it can be a challenge to engage patients and offer therapeutic activities in such a sterile environment.

In an attempt to deal with this challenge, Arnold Lodge MSU has installed a communication wall or ‘Cowall’ in the seclusion suite of the male mental illness service.

The ‘Communication Wall’
The Cowall is an extremely robust, door-sized, touch-screen media tablet device fitted flush into the seclusion room wall. The Cowall offers patients safe and novel ways to control and interact with their environment whilst they are nursed seclusion.

Cowall multimedia applications include video, television, radio, telephone, games, photos, reading materials, mood-lighting and relaxation programmes.

Cowall applications and content can be personalised so that patients can access their own music, photos and documents. Content and applications can be tailored to the individual needs of patients and be responsive to changes in patient’s mental state.

Evaluation of Cowall
A multi-disciplinary steering group has overseen the commissioning and implementation of Cowall and developed procedure and policy documents to ensure the safe and appropriate use of the device.

A formal evaluation of Cowall is being undertaken and includes:
- Service user engagement with Cowall and use of specific applications during seclusion episodes
- Post-seclusion patient ratings of helpfulness of Cowall generally and for individual applications
- Patient feedback on further development of applications and use of Cowall
- Case studies using routinely collected data to examine pre-post seclusion behaviour
- Preliminary feedback from service users and staff is presented here, however we intend to publish the evaluation results in full when it is complete.

Cowall Applications

Initial Feedback on Cowall
Service users and nursing staff were invited to ‘road-test’ the Cowall applications before the suite was opened. Feedback from this engagement exercise suggested that:

- ‘It will give patients another way to communicate with staff’
- ‘Cowall will help patients manage their feelings’
- ‘Cowall will help patients communicate with their friends & family’
- ‘It may help patients move out of seclusion or long-term segregation more quickly’

Feedback from the first two patients to use the Cowall seclusion suite is presented in Figure 1. Both patients quickly engaged with the device and initial feedback was positive, especially in terms of the features that provide stimulation & relaxation.

Months later, with patient ‘A’ having progressed greatly, the Cowall was reported as having been a significant help in coping when first admitted with distress and the sense of isolation. The Cowall drawing app provided an additional way for patient ‘B’ to communicate with staff at a time when the patient’s psychotic symptoms made engagement with staff very limited and difficult.

Feedback from a third patient, who used the room for a period of LTS, indicated that there were positive aspects to using the Cowall, but that further improvements could be made:

“I liked watching TV on it and drawing. There weren’t enough options for drawing though. It would have been good to be able to fill a whole area in colour or use straight lines or a creative function.”

“IT was good because they [staff] downloaded photos onto it for me, of cars and dogs.”

“The Cowall was good because I could sit there myself and feel less in the spotlight, not having to have staff observing.”

“I felt more comfortable being alone with the Cowall.”

“I liked the Glo-well, I could play music and set the lighting to feel more comfortable, especially for when I was having a shower.”

Future development of Cowall
The steering group is working to implement the following suggestions for the Cowall proposed by service users and staff at Arnold Lodge:

- Video showing safe room entry/exit
- TED talks and documentaries
- Yoga & mindfulness exercises
- Introduction to Advocacy services
- Activities e.g. Origami
- Peer experiences of seclusion
- More individualised photos
- Mental Health Act rights leaflets
- Care Plans
- Ward Timetable
- Social Worker contacts
- Post Cards From... (peer/self advice)

Figure 1. Use of specific applications during the initial periods of seclusion for service user ‘A’ and service user ‘B’

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