

## The CQ Family 'Share & Care' Bear Project – Promoting Care, Compassion and Cohesion in General Practice

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It is well established that General Practice is the front line of primary healthcare (PHC) and is usually the first port of call for the provision of healthcare services to community populations, especially in rural areas. Much has been written about the medical, nursing and administrative service provision to PHC but what about the human face of PHC, the person-centred act of kindness and care-giving? A smile, a welcoming approach and kind words are just the starting point from which staff develop the rapport and bonding with patients and the local community that each practice serves. However, at the foundation of this is the encircling 'thread' of compassion, care and cohesion that fosters the basis for person centred care, understanding and patient, carer/family satisfaction. For many General Practices this is considered to be best practice or the benchmark starting point.

However, the expanding of this benchmark can create uniquely positive opportunities and outcomes for patients, carers and practice staff. For the medical, nursing and administrative staff at the CQ Family Practice in Mount Morgan, Central Queensland, we have used this benchmark as a stepping stone to take a progressive leap even further. Through thoughts of inspiration and team planning our 'thread' has expanded and evolved from the inclusion of tools including a pair of knitting needles/crochet hook, a basic knitting/crochet pattern, balls of brightly coloured acrylic yarn and an abundance of stitches that have been woven with genuine love, and skill to create our inspirational 'Share & Care Bear Project'. For most children and adults the teddy bear represents comfort and friendship. Within our practice our bears have been created to also foster kinship, reward 'bravery', provide diversional therapy and facilitate a means of promoting improvements in physical, mental, emotional well-being and resilience for our patients and practice staff.

Our staff chose to implement the Share & Care Bear Project into our medical practice originally to take the 'scariness' out of a doctors' visit for our child patients and to engage with parents to promote immunisation compliance. In general no one ever presents to a Doctors' surgery 'excited' about getting an injection or to undergo a medical procedure that may involve pain, especially children. Our bears have demonstratively helped in taking the 'sting' out of immunisations or other unavoidable painful experiences. The 'Bear' is the child's new friend, an effective distraction for both the child and the often anxious parent/carer. We offer the child a choice of bears which have been hand knitted/crocheted, hand sewn, stuffed, embroidered and costume co-ordinated by our very own practice staff. Each child is encouraged to cuddle, hold and talk about their bear during the experience; they 'name' their new bear friend and take their free bear home with them to keep. It's simple and has been an excellent success in promoting child and parent/carer comfort and satisfaction as expressed from the smiles on faces and when the child inevitably draws the bear in close for a hug and a kiss. It's about each child and family being offered care and understanding in a holistic and meaningful manner.

What about the fostering of friendship and building of rapport with our patients? A visit to the doctors' surgery can be a daunting experience for patients with the foreign 'clinical' sounds and smells that practice staff take for granted. What do our bears do? Our bears:

- Weave a thread of friendship and welcoming to our patients as they enter the practice and undergo whatever consult or procedure they are booked in for.
- Are extremely effective in breaking the ice as they can 'speak' a language without using words that is understood not only across the age span but also across an array of multicultural population groups and people with disabilities.

Teddy bears are a child's best friend, but what about our elderly or those with disabilities? In general practice patients come from all walks of life and we often assist adult patients who have intellectual disabilities. Our bears are generally accepted by our patients and are used for diversional therapy for children and some adults undergoing blood collection by the Practice Nurses. For example, an elderly female patient with an intellectual disability presented to the practice for a consult with our GP who then ordered a blood collection. Lilly (pseudonym) was brought into the nurses' room for this to be done. She was anxious about this procedure and the Practice Nurse calmed and prepared Lilly for this. Numerous bears adorned the top of the vaccine fridge and a basket of the bears was brought down and placed near Lilly to be used as diversional therapy during the procedure. A discussion was had between Lilly, her carer and the Practice Nurse concerning these bears. It was discovered that Lilly had never been given a bear of her own during her lifetime due to poverty experiences as a child. However, this soon changed when Lilly was given a bear from that very basket post procedure. The moment was magical, leaving a smile on the faces of all involved including our GP and administration staff.

Lilly's smile was priceless as she left the practice with her first 'teddy bear' in her 87 years of life clutched close to her chest. This brought the warm feelings that follow a simple act of kindness, that being the human face of General Practice. PHC is not only about healthcare service provision, it's about offering compassion and understanding to provide for the holistic needs of each person in order to improve or enhance their life. It's true that Lilly showed great bravery and was certainly deserving of her bear. However, it was also about practice staff recognising an opportunity to make that 'difference' to an elderly patient's life thus seizing the moment to offer humanity and thoughtfulness. Although Lilly's unfortunate past experiences can't be changed, her future is now a little brighter.

General Practice offers a variety of healthcare services to meet the needs of local populations of people with differing physical, mental, emotional needs. One of the most prevalent activities undertaken by practice staff is certainly health promotion. Our bears are instrumental in the promotion of health from a very unique perspective including enhancing the physical, mental and emotional well-being and resilience of our patients and practice staff across the life span. Our Share & Care Bear Project:

- Provides a positive impact by uplifting the mood of patients experiencing depression as the simple act of creating a bear can improve one's thought processes and assist a person in 'finding a purpose' and/or goal setting.

- For patients with arthritis the gentle, lightweight art of this project can be beneficial in moving arthritic joints to improve movement and reduce pain.
- For those with alcohol, smoking or food addictions the knitting/crochet or construction of these bears offers patients an alternative for the use of their hands and a mental distraction from their addiction habits etc.
- Our practice staff have gained mental and physical relaxation from the stresses experienced at work. This has come from making and distributing the bears and holding a workshop that has been offered to our patients, carers/families.

The 'workshop' idea came from the positive response to the project from patients and the inability of the practice staff to keep up with the demand for the bears. A workshop was held by the staff at the practice and patients, families/carers were orientated to the Bear Project purpose, offered tuition in basic knitting/crochet techniques and given the essentials to the bear construction process. Essential supplies were provided including knitting needles or crochet hooks, acrylic yarn, patterns and fibre filling for the bears. Mixed in with this was great humour and stories, healthy refreshments, discussions and lots of laughter. Open communication and relaxation were huge bonuses that lead to a very healthy outcome. Following the success from this workshop additional future plans for our practice include promoting the 'act of knitting or crocheting' in the waiting room to encourage discussion among patients to reduce anxiety/stressful feelings whilst waiting to consult with the GP or Practice Nurse. Promoting a 'knit and natter'/'crochet and chat' culture between carers/families and patients in the project that fosters community cohesion right from the waiting room setting and out into the local community including the local aged care facility.

Many people feel that a doctors' visit involves prescriptions or treatments for illness or disease. Here at our practice we have taken this a step forward. We have looked beyond illness or disease and promote PHC for its foundational grounding that being the full scope of health promotion in whatever physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and cultural form that may be. Healthy minds and bodies extend from healthy mental, physical and emotional choices and habits to name but a few. We feel that we have found a project that meets this. Could this be an alternative 'prescription' or 'treatment' for your patients? If so, how about establishing a culture that incorporates the inclusion of these inspirational bears into your workplace? Nurses are in the prime position to take leadership and to take an active role in discussing and working with the practice team to implement this project into their General Practice. Our Bear Project is similar to those of the famous 'Trauma Teddies' that are given to children by emergency services and hospitals. The uniqueness of our bear project is that our bears are made voluntarily by our own practice staff and patients, not by strangers.

Through the success of our project thus far a sense of satisfaction, ownership and improvement in health has been gained by our patients, carers/families and our practice staff. We have an efficient, cost effective program working within our practice and our aim is to encourage and assist other practices to do the same. Let's extend this unique share and care culture together. Please contact us at the CQ Family Practice: [cqfamily@hotmail.com](mailto:cqfamily@hotmail.com) , fax: (07) 49382009 or telephone: (07) 49382008 and have a chat with our friendly staff. Let's promote the human face of PHC in General Practice together one stitch at a time. We think our patients, carers/families and staff are certainly deserving of this. Aren't yours?

