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Series (Part 43): Centre for Medical Care Research at the University Hospital Erlangen

Basic research into the treatment of dementia

The Centre for Health Services Research in Medicine, founded in 2011, is affiliated to the University Hospital Erlangen, Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Clinic. The Centre for Health Services Research in Medicine is headed by Prof. Dr Elmar Gräßel, who is supported by Prof. Dr Katharina Luttenberger and Prof. Dr Carolin Donath in the fields of medical psychology and medical sociology. Research is being conducted into the areas of dementia, mild cognitive impairment, stroke, addiction, geriatric illnesses, pain and depression. In addition to the patients in the diagnostic groups being investigated, the ZMV's research participants also include healthy test subjects (adolescents, carers). The work focuses on conducting prospective clinical studies with high-quality study designs (RCT) on non-pharmacological interventions.

>> 'As a long-standing honorary chairman of the Alzheimer Gesellschaft Mittelfranken e. V., it has become clear to me how important it is to pay particular attention to 'the last mile to the patient',' Prof Dr Elmar Gräßel tells 'Monitor Versorgungforschung'. In his opinion, far more intensive research is needed into which therapies and which care services actually reach chronically ill people, in what form and with what effects. This research approach has accompanied him since he started working in healthcare research in Erlangen in 2005, with the study 'Initiative for Dementia Care in General Practice', or IDA for short, a cooperative project in the Central Franconia study region with health insurance companies, GPs and the Helmholtz Centre Munich with the aim of improving care for people with dementia and their relatives.

For Prof Dr Katharina Luttenberger, it was also a study that brought her into



Prof. Dr. med. Elmar Gräßel
heads the Centre for Medical Care Research (ZMV) and, together with Prof. Luttenberger and Prof. Donath, the Department of Medical Psychology and Medical Sociology at the Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Clinic at Erlangen University Hospital.

Vita:
He studied medicine and obtained his doctorate in 1990 at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg. There he received his teaching authorisation for medical psychology in 1998 and for medical sociology in 2003. He has headed the ZMV since 2010. Since 2005, Gräßel has been the principal investigator of eight prospective, randomised-controlled studies on the care of people with cognitive deficits - from mild cognitive impairment to severe dementia - using non-pharmacological interventions. His focus is on research into the multimodal MAKS intervention, which was developed and investigated as part of the BMG's Lighthouse Dementia Initiative (2008-2010).



Prof. Dr. rer. biol. hum. Katharina Luttenberger

She studied psychology at the Otto Friedrich University of Bamberg and completed her doctorate at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg in 2010 on the role of everyday practical skills in dementia. She completed her habilitation in medical psychology in 2013. Ms Luttenberger is also a licensed psychological psychotherapist for behavioural therapy and has headed the MPMS department together with Prof. Gräßel and Prof. Donath since 2017. She has led several third-party-funded studies on the development and validation of bouldering psychotherapy for depression and maintains close collaborations with UNSW in Sydney (Australia), including research into the effectiveness of a psychosocial bouldering intervention for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.



Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Carolin Donath

She studied psychology at the University of Leipzig. She completed her doctorate in 2007 in cooperation between the IFT Institute for Therapy Research, Munich, and the University of Leipzig. There she laid the foundation for work on substance use and the prevention of risky consumption patterns such as binge drinking. Since 2006, she has been a research associate at the ZMV and in the Department of Medical Psychology and Medical Sociology in Erlangen. In 2011, she completed her habilitation in medical psychology and health services research at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg. She leads several projects on the evaluation of multimodal pain therapy and was appointed Associate Professor in 2023.

healthcare research: This was the MAKS study on multimodal therapy for people with dementia - incidentally nominated for the MSD Health Award 2024. 'That was the first research project I worked on in interventional healthcare research,' recalls Luttenberger. Since then, it has always been important to her to actually carry out and implement new therapeutic approaches in the living environment of those affected. Katharina Luttenberger comments: 'Overall, we have good healthcare provision in Germany. However, there is still a lot of room for improvement, especially in the area of mental illness. With my research, I would like to expand the spectrum of available therapeutic approaches in order to be able to help more people in a customised way.Various forms of therapy have been developed to customise MAKS therapy (motor, practical, cognitive, social) to the needs of people with different degrees of dementia:MAKS-m for mild to moderate dementia and MAKS-s for severe dementia. According to Gräßel, MAKS therapy has clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in terms of cognitive and everyday practical skills as well as psychological and behavioural symptoms in two further large randomised controlled trials in German care homes and day care facilities. A variant of MAKS therapy has also been developed and successfully evaluated for outpatient assisted living communities.

Several international research collaborations are currently underway, including with research groups in China, Mexico and Norway, in order to further disseminate MAKS therapy** internationally so that those affected in other countries can also benefit from the advantages of this therapy.

The ZMV researchers are also working on the development of universally applicable combined success measurement criteria in various contexts of multimodal pain therapy. 'In doing so, we are trying totake into account the patient-centred view of successful treatment, includingso-called PROMS. This allows us to prove that resource-intensive multimodal therapies that integrate the bio-psycho-social perspective into care by involving various specialist disciplines are a major step forward,' explains Prof Dr Carolin Donath. In Germany, these programmes are already being established across the country, with Germany acting as a kind of pioneer. Using sound, data-based evaluation in a 'real' care context, it has been shown that these are also beneficial for chronic pain patients in the long term. We are currently working on the specification of success criteria for multimodal pain therapy for chronic headaches and for patients with lower abdominal pain (endometriosis).

In the treatment of depression, we are focussing on activity-based group psychotherapy - Boulder psychotherapy, says project manager Luttenberger. Behavioural therapy methods are developed and implemented directly in the climbing hall with the patients - the therapy has a multimodal effect on the level of thoughts, feelings, body activation and behaviour. In two randomised controlled studies, bouldering psychotherapy has already been shown to be at least not inferior to behavioural therapy and significantly better compared to an active control group, as well as being cost-effective. A psychosocial Boulder intervention with young Syrian refugees in Lebanon also resulted in a significant improvement in mental health and psychological stress.

The situation of carers and family members is being examined in the research group on family member research headed by PD Dr Anna Pendergrass: For carers - in Germany, more than five million people are currently cared for, supported and nursed by their relatives at home - caring often represents a high physical, psychological and financial burden*. The need for support services and counselling is correspondingly high, yet existing professional support services (e.g. outpatient care services, day care) are rarely used. In the large-scale longitudinal study 'Needs and requirements of family carers', the reasons for the (non-) use of central support services are determined using a questionnaire. In addition, the study 'Progression in home care - Fortschritt in der häuslichen Pflege' is developing and evaluating the training module 'Motivierende Gesprächsführung in der Pflegeberatung' for care counsellors, as needs-based professional counselling adapted to the specific needs of family carers is a key function in improving the living situation of carers and cared-for persons. The aim is

* www.caregiver-burden.eu

** www.maks-therapie.de

to establish the training programme across the board as a supplement to training as a care advisor in accordance with Section 7a SGB XI. <<



Dr. André Kratzer, MSc Psych., research assistant (postdoc), currently undergoing further training to become a psychological psychotherapist

>> Why are you working/studying at the Centre for Medical Care Research?

During my psychology studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, I became aware of the exciting research projects as a student assistant at the Centre for Health Services Research back in 2015, so I also wrote my master's thesis on Erlangen Boulder Psychotherapy for people with depression and my doctoral thesis on psychosocial interventions for people with dementia there.

What do you think makes the Centre for Medical Care Research so special?

I am particularly fascinated by the variety of practice-relevant research topics, which range from research into innovative treatment options for depression and dementia to psychometric validation of care-relevant measurement instruments and the investigation of the care situation of people with dementia and their carers and relatives. The research is always very close to everyday care, which keeps it exciting!

What topics and issues are you currently working on?

I am currently leading the 'SinoMAKS' study, in which MAKS therapy for people with dementia is being comprehensively culturally adapted to China and its effectiveness is being investigated as part of a randomised controlled study in Chinese care homes. I am also leading a large-scale survey study on the needs and requirements of family carers.

What would you personally like to achieve with care research?

It is very important to me personally to use healthcare research to provide new impetus for current research, but also specifically for healthcare practice, in order to make a contribution to the further development of healthcare and achieve something meaningful. <<



Leona Kind MSc, research assistant, doctoral student and psychological psychotherapist in further training

>> Why do you work/study at the Centre for Medical Care Research?

During my bachelor's degree, I was fascinated by the field of sports psychology, which is why I was looking for a job that combined psychotherapy with sport/exercise. I started working on the Climbing and Mood project in 2017, initially as a research assistant. It was precisely this exciting combination of psychotherapy and climbing that was being researched.

What do you think makes the Centre for Medical Care Research stand out?

The work is a great addition to training as a psychological psychotherapist, as healthcare research lays the foundation for psychotherapeutic work in the form of proof of effectiveness, among other things. The results of our studies make it possible to further develop existing therapeutic approaches and implement new approaches in patient care.

What topics and issues are you currently working on?

I am still looking at the interaction between psychotherapy and bouldering, now as part of a new research project called 'New ways out of depression'. In the new study, the main focus is on demonstrating the specific impact factors of bouldering psychotherapy and measurable physical changes.

What would you personally like to achieve with health services research?

In addition to my doctorate and my own further development, it is important to me that many patients can benefit. <<

MVF-series „VF made in ..."

Starting with the first instalment in 2016, when 'Monitor Versorgungsforschung' visited Greifswald to present the Institute for Community Medicine, this issue focuses on 40 very different locations. What they all have in common is that they harmonise research and teaching and put a lot of passion and impetus into what health services research is really all about: the honest endeavour to improve people's lives and health care a little. All previous episodes of the series can be found here: https://www.monitor-versorgungsforschung.de/cooperations/vf-serie/