

# Full circle support

SUZANNE RUGGLES, MSC, DIPHE, MFHT, TALKS ABOUT ESTABLISHING THE FULL CIRCLE FUND, AN INTEGRATED SERVICE FOR PATIENTS WITH LIFE-CHALLENGING ILLNESS

It's good news and bad news,' my consultant said, as he diagnosed me with lupus. 'The good news', he informed me, was that 'I looked well'. And the bad news? I wasn't.

He went on to tell me I had an incurable illness, that my antibodies were dangerously high and, if left unchecked, my immune system could attack any organ or system in my body. He then said: 'You've got to learn to manage your stress' before explaining that 75% of the illnesses he saw, including mine, were linked to or exacerbated by stress.

I knew I was stressed but I thought it was just part of the territory of life. I had been building a successful design business for

six years and my clients included royalty, the V&A museum, Hollywood actors and international banks. I had just taken on a major financial commitment in the shape of a five-storey derelict building on the King's Road in Chelsea. If it failed, my house was on the line.

I asked my consultant how I should go about managing my stress, confident that he'd have the solution. He replied: 'I have no idea, but if you ever find out, let me know.'

Suddenly, I felt lost. I had just been given a frightening diagnosis, the treatment for which was steroids and if that failed, chemotherapy, and I had no idea how to help myself.

My mother sensed my distress and

confusion and suggested I should try some therapies that she had experienced. The first was energy medicine, which put me into an unexpected bubble of peacefulness. After my first session, I had the best night's sleep I could remember. The second was massage therapy with visualisation. The practitioner guided me to understand that the body will do all it can to return to a state of homeostasis but, if there is no let-up in stress, it cannot be expected to return to balance. I began to realise the impact of sustained stress and, crucially, what I could do to help myself.

I became increasingly fascinated by the connection between mind, body and health. I sold my gallery and trained in

## WHY 'FULL CIRCLE FUND'?

I called it 'Full Circle' following a near-death experience caused by bacterial meningitis when the urgent need for this type of project was crystallised. Full Circle became the vehicle for a hospital-based service providing a blueprint of excellence so every person facing a life-challenging condition can receive the full circle of life-restoring, compassionate and expert support needed to preserve their spirit.



Suzanne in discussion with a haematology nurse

PICTURES: PAUL MARTIN



## AT A GLANCE

- The project started in 2001 and became a restricted fund within the hospital charity until 2015, when it became an independent charity, Full Circle Fund Therapies.
- The aim is to provide an evidence-based integrative therapy project, which delivers safe, professional treatments to life-limited children and adults and their families in complex medical environments.
- The project has supported more than 10,000 people. Many of the projects have been the first of their kind in the UK.
- The service supports patients at:
  - St George's University Hospital Foundation Trust including oncology, haematology, palliative care, paediatric medicine, intensive care units and neuro-surgery.
  - The Royal Sussex, Brighton and Sussex University Hospital Trust, currently supporting patients receiving cancer and palliative care. We are currently developing plans to expand this project trust-wide.
- The Full Circle team consists of 15 practitioners offering mind/body interventions including massage, reflexology, reiki, clinical hypnotherapy and mindfulness.
- Self-help therapies are also offered to empower patients, including relaxation techniques, clinical hypnotherapy, mindfulness, breath focus training and visualisation.
- The charity has provided training to over 25 practitioners.
- The Full Circle Fund team has received two awards: St George's NHS Healthcare Trust's Exceptional Award (2005) and St George's NHS Values Award for Paediatric Medicine (2015).



Full Circle Therapies on a children's ward

various modalities which I personally had found to be helpful, including energy medicine, neuro-linguistic programming and reflexology.

A few years later, I started a degree in health psychology at Birkbeck University and went to Harvard to learn more about the science of relaxation, the relaxation response and positive psychology. In 2014 I graduated with a master's in health sciences from St George's Hospital Medical School.

### SETTING UP A COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY SERVICE

In December 2000, I found myself working at my local hospital – St George's Hospital, London, one of the largest teaching hospitals in the UK. I was only meant to be there for a few months, working on an administrative project. I was in the hospital's haematology and bone marrow transplant unit and immediately realised there was a need for complementary therapies; the majority of patients admitted had blood cancer and were in sealed isolation rooms, receiving high dose chemotherapy or bone marrow transplantation.

Another group of patients in this unit had sickle cell disorder. Those born with this devastating illness often have strokes in early childhood and have lived with excruciating pain throughout their lives, regularly missing months or years of school as a result of their illness. I was to learn that one of the known triggers for a sickle cell crisis (episode) was stress, and our focus to support this patient group was the first of its kind in the UK.

A chance conversation on my first day

with the busy junior sister revealed more about the scale of the 'human need' for her patients. About her leukaemia patients, she commented: 'It's so tough for them, and there's only so much we can do as nurses to help them get through the chemo and all the side effects. It can be so traumatic.'

When she asked what I did, her face lit up and she said: 'We really need your therapies here, to support them – and us.' We both understood a mountain lay ahead but when I spoke with the ward sister the next day, she called in the department's professor. We agreed that I should write up a business plan.

The red tape was navigated, the model accepted and through ward funds (which are donations given by patients) it was agreed that a fund would be established. This would eventually be named the Full Circle Fund, which became an independent charity in 2015.

Initially, it was myself as a practitioner and, as demand very quickly increased, I recruited another reflexologist, Jo Mead. I chose Jo as she was not only a well-trained practitioner but, crucially, a biomedical scientist. Jo's 'day job' was to analyse blood samples of haematology patients, so she was able to converse with doctors at a scientific level, which turned out to be a pivotal decision.

It was early 2001 when she joined and the mood around complementary therapies – with the exception of a few amazing nurses – was at best neutral and at worst hostile. However, little by little, we were able to elevate the perception of complementary therapy with the clinical personnel who hadn't had the opportunity yet to

understand the professional level at which we operated.

Within two years, the project won the hospital's prestigious NHS Exceptional Award. What made our first award even more special was that we were nominated by one of the haematology consultants, a world leading authority in sickle cell disorder.

It is a great responsibility to set up a project of this type and one I think about every day. Protecting and honouring, at all costs, the vulnerability of patients to whom we are referred, is always our starting point. Helping 'science' – be it doctors, nurses, physiotherapists or other healthcare professionals – to understand why, how and in which way an integrative approach can be helpful for their patients, remains a central focus of our project's wider sharing.

Because I was supported and encouraged by senior nurses and a small but increasing number of consultants, I was able to keep Full Circle moving forwards in some of the most complex areas in medicine.

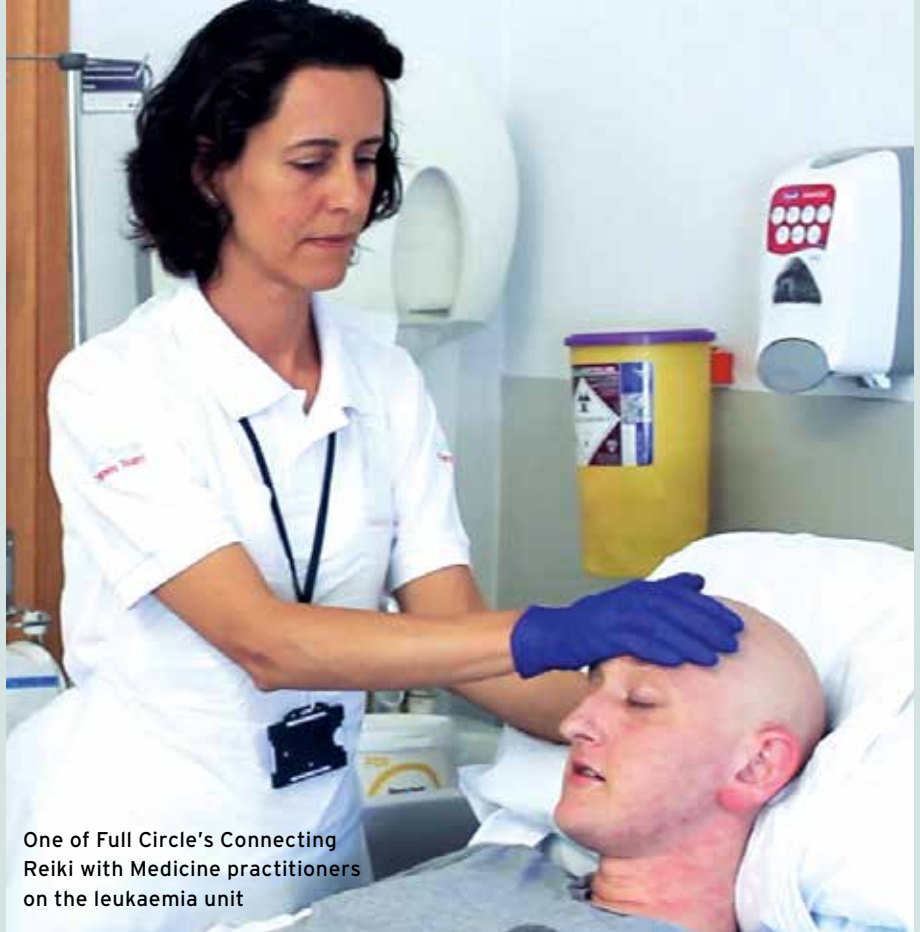
As time passed, Full Circle's work and professional approach became known in other areas of the trust too. A physiotherapist who had worked in haematology and was now working in paediatric medicine, asked for us to be referred to see one of her paralysed teenage patients in intensive care. Because of our reputation, we were cleared by the child's consultant and family within 24 hours.

### EVALUATING THE SERVICE

Maybe because of my own experience of the confusion and vulnerability which accompanies a major illness, or maybe because of my former business experience as a designer, our model has always been to approach each element of our work using a '360-degree view'. Simply put, this means paying rigorous attention to every detail, including risk, and continually evaluating and assessing the service.

I've always been a collaborative worker, so sought advice at every step. The need for an evidence-based approach to our work has always been integral to the Full Circle vision. However, a small charity like ours has limited resources, so it wasn't possible to consider any large scale research. So a pragmatic solution was designed.

I met the trust's medical director and her sage advice at that time was: 'Don't stray into using research tools without ethics approval – start with service evaluations.' We called in the audit and effectiveness team and they helped us design our first questionnaire, which we have used since 2010. In addition, for pain scores we currently use a visual analogue scale



One of Full Circle's Connecting Reiki with Medicine practitioners on the leukaemia unit

(VAS), which is a simple and validated measurement tool.


One notable finding that came out of this was that the symptoms in patients with chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy – a progressive, debilitating and permanent form of nerve damage – were mitigated for an average of 24 hours following touch therapies, with patients consistently self-reporting a decrease in pain and reduction of numbness. We have continued looking into this area, thanks to specific funding, and our project now includes clinical hypnotherapy and mindfulness, and our findings are being prepared for publication.

### THE FULL CIRCLE SERVICE

Currently we have a team of 15 highly skilled practitioners working in two hospitals, consisting of paid therapists and volunteers. They all undertake our in-depth induction process, mentoring and advanced training programme, which is to become a Full Circle hospital-based training/CPD course for qualified practitioners.

We have partnered with a leading US hospital to undertake research and have an honorary clinical director of education and strategy leading our research committee. We currently have many case studies being prepared for publication in peer-reviewed journals, and I presented the work of Full Circle at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Integrated Healthcare, at which chair David Tredinnick MP said: 'The Full Circle model should be rolled out nationally.' We also hold two awards for our work in the NHS.

When I look back, I am grateful my consultant mentioned stress to me because it planted a seed. Obviously I wish he had known more about it, so that he could have signposted me at the time, but at Full Circle we are hopeful that more clinicians will know about the role integrative therapies can play in the holistic care of their patients and safely signpost them to expert practitioners.

I got lucky. I found the right people at the right time and through it, was able to expand my knowledge outwards. To date, Full Circle has supported more than 10,000 babies, children and adults with a life-limiting condition, and their families, and we are now working on plans and funding for projects at two children's hospitals. 



**Suzanne Ruggles, MSc, DipHE, MFHT**, is the founder and CEO of Full Circle Fund, which has been pioneering the importance of holistic, integrated support for hospital patients with

life-challenging illnesses for over 15 years by providing a team of award-winning therapists [fullcirclefund.org.uk](http://fullcirclefund.org.uk)

### LEARN MORE AT THE 2019 FHT CONFERENCE

Suzanne will be giving a presentation about the work of the Full Circle Fund at our 2019 FHT Conference: Supporting the Integrated Healthcare Agenda on Friday 29 November at The King's Fund. For more information, visit [fht.org.uk/conference](http://fht.org.uk/conference)

