An introduction to the Tenovus Write with Us programme, which explores writing as a therapeutic tool for people living with cancer.

There has been growing interest over the past 20 years in exploring the use of expressive writing as a tool to improve physical and mental health and well-being. James Pennebaker of the Department of Psychology, University of Texas, USA, is a recognised scholar in the field. In a paper by Pennebaker and Seagal, the authors discuss the benefits of regular expressive writing, stating: ‘Extensive research has revealed that when people put their emotional upheavals into words, their physical and mental health improves markedly’.

Creative writing has been shown to improve physical and psychological health. In addition, writing about emotionally difficult or traumatic events has proven to be more effective in improving conditions such as trauma, stress levels, blood pressure and days spent in hospital than writing about ‘neutral’ subjects.

The benefits of writing as a tool for self-development and personal growth are becoming more recognised and practitioners such as Gillie Bolton, Victoria Field and Kate Thompson have practised extensively in this field. There is a growth in the number of groups that focus upon the therapeutic benefits of writing, ranging from informal writing groups for people living with mental health issues, to courses that encompass approaches to writing for health and well-being. Literature Wales, for example, has an entire programme dedicated to this area and the work of Lapidus (the writing for well-being organisation) continues to expand. The field of poetry therapy is also growing and it is now possible to be an accredited poetry therapist although, at present, this is predominantly USA-focused.

Writing as a cathartic process

From research, and from the experiences and research of those who have worked on the Tenovus Write with Us programme, it would seem the cathartic process of writing is more important than the final product. The freedom that can come from pouring one’s innermost thoughts on to a page, without fear of being picked up on grammar, spelling or syntax, is a key driver for many people to put pen to paper.

Although many who join therapeutic writing groups have a desire to see their works published and seek to hone their skills as writers in a safe environment, for the majority the benefits come from the experience of articulating and sharing feelings in a different way. The sharing is often as important as the writing, as participants in a group read each other’s work or read their own aloud. In their book, Writing your Self, Schneider and Killick describe this as an act that ‘[…] transforms the personal into the universal, allowing readers to recognise the similarities in their own lives and in the lives of the rest of mankind’.

Putting pen to paper
Developing Write with Us
It was amid this growing interest in the field of therapeutic writing that Welsh cancer charity Tenovus devised its Write with Us programme in 2012. Tenovus delivers a holistic range of support services for people affected by cancer in Wales, including treatment and formal and informal support. The charity also funds around £1 million of cancer research a year and aims to provide accessible and equitable treatment and support to people across Wales.

The number of people living with cancer is increasing by around 3.2 per cent each year and, if this trend continues, almost half of people in the UK will be living with cancer by 2020. With this in mind, ongoing support for cancer survivors, carers and their families is becoming increasingly important.

The benefits of formal support after cancer diagnosis are well known. However, less has been written about informal interventions, which usually take place in community settings after treatment has finished.

Write with Us is one of eight Tenovus creative support groups aiming to provide a friendly, informal, imaginative forum for anyone affected by cancer. Other group activities include singing, book discussions, drawing, painting and crafts. All groups are evaluated using a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Write with Us was established in January 2012 as a pilot research project to measure the impact of creative activity on the mood and emotion of participants affected by cancer. A qualitative approach was taken because of the complex nature of the subject area and the pioneering nature of this type of ‘real world’ research in the field of cancer research.

The methodology defined creative writing broadly, as ‘any form of writing that is an expression or outlet’, and the six weekly pilot sessions covered a range of topics. Each session ran for two hours in the evening to allow full-time workers to attend, and was based in a central location to maximise accessibility. The project facilitators were paid professionals with a background in creative writing and research.

The sessions were designed to cater to all levels and abilities of creative writing and participants were encouraged to write about any areas of interest. The notion of writing directly about experience of cancer was not introduced until the third session; by which time the group had ‘gelled’ a little and participants were beginning to relax and open up about their experiences.

The pilot resulted in a publication by the group members called In Our Own Words which was launched in July 2013. Having an outlet for their work was an important element in the success of the project and has resulted in plans for a Write with Us blog for group members.

Findings from the pilot showed positive reflections from participants and identified an increase in confidence, improved social function and benefits to mental well-being from both group attendance and the writing itself.

Creating a sustainable model
Following the successful pilot results, Tenovus carried out a literature review to identify whether peer and volunteer-led support groups might offer a sustainable model for the programme going forward. This revealed consistent positive benefits of ‘real life’ peer support for cancer patients and little difference between professionally-led and peer-led support groups, suggesting it is the supportive environment and not necessarily the professional background of the leader that is most important.

Based on these findings and an identified gap in knowledge on volunteer-led writing groups for cancer patients, Tenovus developed a process to establish multiple volunteer-led creative writing groups in Wales.

Write with Us facilitators were recruited through an advertising, application and interview selection process. All were required to have some experience.
in facilitation, creative writing and low-level emotional support.

Following interviews and training, 10 volunteer facilitators were selected. They attended a three-day creative writing training workshop, which included exercises to encourage and develop confidence; advice on giving reassurance and positive feedback; providing low-level support for people when writing about difficult topics; particularly cancer; and using writing as a cathartic and expressive outlet. Each participant was given support materials and literature.

Two volunteers were assigned as facilitators to one of two groups, with others given a supporting role. The facilitators were paired for safety, support and to share the workload, with the pairing based on location and experience, to ensure a balanced skill set.

Two weekly groups were launched, one in Cardiff and one in Caerphilly, in September 2013. However, uptake proved slower than expected. Telephone calls to people who expressed interest revealed a lack of clarity around what the groups would involve and uncertainty about whether they would be ‘good enough’ at writing to join in. Because of this identified barrier all publicity materials emphasised participants did not need writing experience or skills to take part. In addition, materials had a warm tone, highlighting the welcoming nature and social side of the groups.

Despite targeted marketing and tailored materials the Caerphilly group was disbanded in March 2014 due to low attendance. The Cardiff group continues to run on a fortnightly basis and two more groups have been established in Cowbridge and Abergavenny. Establishment of the two additional groups was successful because these are made up of existing cancer support group members who expressed an interest in creative writing. This is an important lesson learned from the project as establishing an intimate (and sometimes emotively driven) group with relative strangers is harder than working with an established group of people who know each other and meet regularly. This is a key finding – that creative writing can be incorporated into existing support structures as well as providing new ones.

The three groups carry out a range of individual and interactive activities that encourage members to write for therapeutic purposes (Box 1). While some members wish to develop their writing skills, others benefit from simply writing their thoughts, feelings and emotions.

All groups are evaluated using a validated mood-emotion scale to track changes in mental well-being during each session. In-depth qualitative interviews have also been carried out at the end of eight weeks with participants. Some participant observation will also be used during the workshops.

The project secured £1,000 from the Co-operative Community Fund in May 2014 with plans to apply for further funding in 2014/2015. Final findings from the project were to be collated, analysed and disseminated in September 2014.

**FHT comment:** Please note the FHT does not currently cover the facilitation of poetry therapy or creative writing from a membership and insurance point of view.

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**Box 1:** In two groups (Cardiff and Cowbridge) we passed around two photographs of inspiring scenes (the London Eye lit up by lightning and a beach scene). Each person had to write down one line they associated with that image. When everyone had written down their lines, we read out each one and rearranged them into a poem. The exercise worked far better than we’d anticipated with both groups, and it was interesting to see the difference between their approaches. The Cardiff group had very different impressions of their photographs, while the Cowbridge group, who have known each other for a longer time, tended to pick out similar things. We used these similarities to set up repetition in one of the poems, splitting it into two verses.

A lot of people are daunted by the idea of writing poetry. This gave us a little insight into how it is to work with a poem line by line, image by image. Having the photographs as prompts allowed us to focus on something specific, rather than trying to pick a topic out of the air. The results were inspiring.

**Sharon Kendrick and Lydia Aston, Write with Us facilitators**

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**References and further reading**

4. Literature Wales: www.lwennydauethynnys.org.uk/ writing-for-wellbeing
5. Lapidus: www.lapidus.org.uk
6. The National Association for Poetry Therapy: www.poetrytherapy.org
11. Tenovus Write with Us programme: www.tenovus.org.uk/how-we-can-help-you/write-with-us

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**About the authors**

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Karen Lewis is co-director of the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling at the University of South Wales, Cardiff, where her focus is on developing storytelling and other narrative approaches in the field of health and social care.

Katherine Hughes is an independent researcher who took part in the original pilot writing groups and went on to lead the training for creative writing volunteer facilitators with Karen Lewis. Her book, *Achieving Wellbeing After Breast Cancer*, was published by Tenovus in 2011.

Ian Lewis has been involved in the establishment, development and evaluation of a number of arts-based health interventions, including the Write with Us programme (since inception) and the Tenovus Sing with Us project, a national programme of choirs for people affected by cancer.

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