

# Research into the effectiveness of workplace counselling: new developments

Professor **John McLeod** provides an update

The importance of research is widely recognised by purchasers and providers of employee assistance programmes (EAPs) and other work-related counselling services. A revised and updated review of the evidence base for workplace counselling, commissioned by BACP, analyses the results of 128 studies of workplace counselling published between 1980 and 2005<sup>1</sup>. The key findings of the review suggest that, in organisations that make workplace counselling available, around 6.5 per cent of employees make direct personal use of the service each year. The vast majority (more than 90 per cent) of employees who use workplace counselling are highly satisfied with the service they have received, would use it again if necessary and would recommend it to colleagues. In addition, counselling interventions are generally effective in alleviating symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression in the majority of workplace clients, and have been found, in the majority of studies that have examined this factor, to reduce sickness absence rates in clients by up to 60 per cent. These results are encouraging for practitioners involved in workplace counselling, and will help to reassure service users that counselling represents an effective and relevant means of addressing problems of stress and work-life balance.

Beyond the general findings of the review, the report identifies some key studies, that highlight critical issues and reflect significant areas of innovation within the field. Arthur<sup>2</sup> investigated the severity of mental health problems in employees who attend EAP counselling. New referrals for counselling were invited to complete the GHQ-12 (a mental health screening instrument) and a supplementary questionnaire (designed for the study) that elicited information on gender, age, ethnicity, chronicity and severity of problems, and disturbance of work performance. One hundred and eleven clients completed these forms, drawn from a wide range of organisations. Using a conservative cut-off score to define psychiatric

'caseness', it was found that 87 per cent of these clients could be categorised as cases (ie reporting levels of psychological problems similar to those found in psychiatric in-patients), with 43 per cent of clients recording scores that were effectively at the ceiling of the scale. Many clients (86 per cent) reported that their problems had affected them for six months or longer. The findings of Arthur<sup>2</sup> in respect of levels of psychological distress in workplace counselling clients are reinforced by the results of other studies included in the McLeod<sup>1</sup> review. This phenomenon underscores the value of workplace counselling, as a means of responding rapidly and flexibly to the needs of such employees, and raises questions about the clinical appropriateness, for highly distressed clients, of strict limits on the number of counselling sessions that are available to them.

The issue of session limits is also addressed in a study by Csiernik<sup>3</sup> into EAP services in Canada. Csiernik distributed a questionnaire to EAP coordinators in 154 organisations, exploring a range of issues around service delivery, qualifications of counsellors, access to services, and programme management and evaluation. The results of this survey revealed around half of these organisations capped EAP provision (five-12 sessions), and half supported uncapped services. The average number of sessions used by clients (five) was the same in capped and uncapped services. This study suggests that limiting the number of sessions that clients are eligible to access has no impact in terms of costs, because the same number of sessions are used whether or not a limit is imposed. However, the greater flexibility associated with uncapped services can give counsellors the scope to respond adequately to the needs of more distressed clients.

The studies carried out by Gersons et al<sup>4</sup> and Salmela-Aro et al<sup>5</sup> demonstrate the clinical utility of developing interventions that are tailored to problems reported by specific groups of clients in specific organisational settings. Gersons et al<sup>4</sup> devised an integrative therapy programme for police



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officers who had been emotionally traumatised in the course of their duties. Salmela-Aro et al<sup>5</sup> developed a group-based therapeutic intervention for public sector employees suffering from burnout. In both of these studies, the intervention was targeted on particular issues and change mechanisms that had been identified as central to the difficulties being experienced by each group, and in both studies strikingly high success rates were reported. These findings suggest that it may be valuable for the profession to augment the provision of generic counselling services with integrative interventions that are conceptually and empirically tailored to the specific patterns of client problems.

Although most EAPs offer telephone counselling, and an increasing number of counsellors and counselling agencies have found ways of including email contact in their way of working with clients, until now there has been very little research into these therapy modalities. However, Kurioka et al<sup>6</sup>, in a study of email counselling, and Reese et al<sup>7</sup>, in an investigation of client perceptions of telephone counselling, have gone some way towards filling this gap. Each of these studies suggests that there are some clients who are particularly attracted to counselling at a distance, and other who prefer face-to-face contact. The implication here would appear to be that, in order to reach out to all possible clients, a comprehensive workplace counselling service needs to embrace telephone and email methods as well as traditional face-to-face counselling.

Finally, Shakespeare-Finch and Scully<sup>8</sup> published a multi-method evaluation of an Australian employee assistance programme for ambulance personnel. In their evaluation, Shakespeare-Finch and Scully made use of a wide array of sources of data: (i) analysis of records on utilisation of services over a two-year period; (ii) focus groups with different sub-groups of the staff population; (iii) a survey of all ambulance service personnel. The material that was collected comprised a mix of rich qualitative data, alongside ‘hard’ statistical information. This study provides a uniquely detailed account of the strengths and weaknesses of the model of service provision adopted by this organisation, and represents a testimony to the merits of using a mixed-method evaluation strategy, rather than depending solely on questionnaire data.

These valuable studies indicate some of the

promise and potential of research, in relation to the field of workplace counselling. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the evidence base in this area of counselling practice. One hundred and twenty-eight research articles published in peer-reviewed journals and books over a 25-year period (an average of five studies per year) is not an impressive yield for an international business that has achieved high levels of penetration in all industrialised countries. In addition, many of the studies included in the BACP review are of low methodological quality and limited value. It seems clear that the companies that operate commercially successful EAPs, the large organisations that run in-house counselling services, and the government departments responsible for workplace health and industrial competitiveness, have failed to make sufficient investment in research and development in this important, and growing, area of activity. The consequence of the lack of sustained investment in workplace counselling research has meant that there has been a lack of coordination of research, with good ideas and practices not being picked up by other researchers, and an absence of programmes of research that address key issues in a systematic manner. There are many important questions around policy and practice for which no credible research evidence exists. ■

### References

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