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Announcing the Social Care Elf: a new member of the National Elf Service

Blog Editor

by *André Tomlin and Martin Webber*

How do you keep up to date with the latest reliable social care research?

Ask a hundred people who work in social care and you'll probably get a hundred different answers! There's no simple and easy way to keep abreast of the latest evidence because it's so scattered in terms of where it's published, often in obscure locations, frequently behind pay-walls.

But of course, it's not just about getting your hands on the evidence, it's also about actually being able to read and understand the research when you have the time and inclination. Social care research can be jargon-filled and impenetrable stuff that you need a degree in research methods just to decipher! And there just isn't enough time to spend reading lengthy research reports.

Add to this the fact that there is limited accessible guidance about how to separate the useful social care research from that which is poorly conducted and badly reported (and unfortunately there's quite a bit of that out there). Accessing high quality social care research is challenging, but fortunately help is at hand.

Introducing the National Elf Service



A group of partners led by the NIHR School for Social Care Research and the Personal Social Services Research Unit at LSE, Making Research Count at University of York and Social Services Research Group have been inspired by a simple but effective idea that has been developed by an Oxford University company over recent years. The [National Elf Service](#) is a set of health websites that started in 2011 with the [Mental Elf](#) and the [Learning Disabilities Elf](#) and now contains elves on ten topics.

The sites are simple; they offer easy access to relevant and reliable research in a clear, concise and engaging format. Each weekday an expert writes a blog that summarises an important piece of new research in fewer than 1,000 easy to read words. The bottom line of the research is presented, along with a critical appraisal of the evidence and a clinical commentary that puts the research into context.

So if you're a social worker with an interest in mental health you might get a blog about a new Cochrane systematic review on exercise for dementia, or a paper in the Lancet about community treatment orders for psychosis, or a new guideline on social anxiety disorder. Everything is relevant to UK mental health practice, easy to read and understand, evidence-based and delivered in an engaging format on your preferred device (computer, phone) and via social media.

Each of the ten websites in the National Elf Service is fronted by a friendly elf. The idea here is to make research less daunting by presenting it in a fun and memorable way, and this tactic has worked remarkably well as the sites have become extremely popular with a diverse audience in a relatively short space of time.

The blogs are sent out across various social media channels as well as in more traditional formats, so users can subscribe to regular email alerts or join in with the conversations around each blog on Twitter and Facebook.

Looking forward to the Social Care Elf

What's more, it won't be long before there's a new elf in the woodland. The Social Care Elf is in development and the website will be launched soon. It will adhere to the same simple principles of making high quality social care research more accessible

and usable, so that people who work in the field have the research they need at their fingertips to enable their practice to be informed by relevant research findings.

You can find out more about the ten live elves by visiting the [National Elf Service website](#).

Developing the Elf with you

Join us at the LSE on **Friday 25 July 2014, 10.30 – 13.00** to design and develop the Social Care Elf. Email <mailto:sscr@lse.ac.uk> to register your participation.

About the authors

André Tomlin is Chief Blogger for the Mental Elf which started in May 2011. He has worked as an Information Scientist in Mental Health since the late nineties; initially at Oxford University's Centre for Evidence-Based Mental Health and since 2002 as the Managing Director of Minervation Ltd. He loves blogging, social media and elves! He also has established interests in evidence-based healthcare, usability testing and web design.

Martin Webber is Anniversary Reader in Social Work and Director of the [International Centre for Mental Health Social Research](#) at the University of York. He is a registered social worker with experience of working with adults with a learning disability and mental health problems. His primary research interest is the development and evaluation of social interventions with people with mental health problems.

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