Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

Dr Garry Tew with participants in a yoga class in Harrogate

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£1.4m grant to assess how yoga benefits older people with multiple long-term health conditions

A major £1.4 million study investigating the benefits that yoga brings to older people with multiple long-term health conditions is about to begin at Northumbria University, Newcastle.

The four-year study is funded by the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) and follows evidence that people with a number of long-term health conditions are more likely to have reduced physical function, lower quality of

life and life expectancy, combined with more need for support with mental health issues.

In the UK, two thirds of people over the age of 65 have multimorbidity, which is defined as having two or more long-term health conditions. Conditions include diabetes, heart disease and asthma, and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

The more health problems someone has, the more likely they are to consult a GP, be prescribed drugs and be admitted to hospital. Treatments associated with long-term health conditions account for 70% of NHS expenditure and further research is needed to identify cost-effective treatments for this patient group.

The study therefore aims to determine both the clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness of a specially-adapted yoga programme for older adults with multimorbidity.

Associate Professor Garry Tewof Northumbria's Department of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, will work in partnership with the University of York and independent yoga consultants on the study. The research team will recruit almost 600 adults aged 65 and above who have multimorbidity from across 12 different locations in the UK.

The participants will be randomly assigned to one of two groups. The first group will continue to receive their usual care without any additional support, while the second will receive their usual care plus an invitation to join– the British Wheel of Yoga's 12-week Gentle Years Yoga programme. This programme involves weekly group-based sessions and encouragement to perform specific yoga practices at home.

The participants' progress will be assessed after three, six and twelve months to monitor changes in their quality of life and mental health.

Professor Tew specialises in researching the effects of exercise programmes in people with long-term health conditions. He explained: "Yoga is thought to bring wide-ranging benefits, such as increases in strength, flexibility, balance and quality of life, and reductions in stress, anxiety and depression. In older

adults specifically, there is promising evidence that yoga can improve physical function and quality of life, but more work is needed to understand the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of yoga in older people with multimorbidity.

“Our study will establish the effects of the Gentle Years Yoga programme in this population. A primary focus will be the effect of the programme on peoples’ overall quality of life. We will also review any changes in their reported levels of depression and anxiety and if they are having fewer falls because of improvements in physical function.

“We’ll also be measuring participants’ use of health care resources, which will allow us to establish the cost-effectiveness of the yoga programme. If these results are positive, they will provide evidence for healthcare commissioners to fund yoga within the NHS.”

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The funding for this major study follows the success of a Yorkshire-based pilot trial of the Gentle Years Yoga programme, which was led by Professor Tew in 2016. The findings of the pilot supported the feasibility of conducting the current larger-scale study and provided encouraging preliminary data on the effects of the yoga programme on physical function and quality of life.

In explaining the success of this programme, Professor Tew said: “Common yoga poses are adapted so they can be done using chairs, so that inactive older adults with long-term conditions such as osteoarthritis, high blood

pressure and dementia can safely participate."

He went on to say: "As well as the benefits that exercising brings, the yoga classes also provided a social element, with the opportunity to establish new friendships that help to reduce any feelings of isolation that people might be feeling. Following the end of the pilot study, most of the participants chose to continue with the classes and paid for the sessions themselves, confirming that they found the programme to be of value."

Professor George Marston, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) at Northumbria University, said: "I am absolutely delighted that this project has been funded. As our society ages, finding strategies that lead to healthy old age is becoming more and more important. Garry and his team have the skills and experience to make this project into something with tangible, direct benefits for a large proportion of our society, and will have huge impact in the coming years."

Researchers at Northumbria University are specialising in research that assesses the role of exercise in the prevention and management of long-term conditions. Academics are also investigating other factors such as nutrition, sport participation and sleep to see how they can improve people's health. Their evidence is making the case for financially-viable solutions to address the significant health and social care challenges society faces.

For more information on our research in this area, visit www.northumbria.ac.uk/integratedhealth

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