

Spring 2025
Issue 8

FURTHER, FASTER, FOR ALL.



music therapy • our fundraising heroes • support for cancer care

News and updates from the Royal Free Charity

SCPTIC'S PAIN BREAKTHROUGH



▲ Neil (pictured) had three weeks of relief from chronic pain after an acupuncture session.

A self-proclaimed sceptic has discovered unexpected relief from chronic pain through charity-funded acupuncture.

Neil McQue lives with primary progressive multiple sclerosis (PPMS), a condition that causes persistent back pain.

Neil said: "Because I've got MS, I'm in pain almost all of the time. It's been looked at by various doctors and specialists but they couldn't help. They didn't doubt I had back pain, but they couldn't do anything about it."

Neil, an outpatient at the Royal Free Hospital, decided to have acupuncture while receiving an infusion to manage his symptoms.

He explained: "Ten days later, I was getting up from the bed and I realised there was no pain. My symptoms had gone. It was incredible. It lasted for about three weeks before it wore off. To someone who was sceptical, that was amazing.

"It's not like it was a placebo effect either because I'd already made up my mind. I wasn't going in thinking it would help but now have evidence that it does work. The acupuncturist helped my chronic back pain."

The Royal Free Charity funds acupuncture services for patients referred by chemotherapy suite staff at the Royal Free Hospital. While not a replacement for medical treatment, it enhances patient care for those living with pain.

Acupuncture involves inserting needles at specific points on the body to stimulate nerves under the skin and muscles. This process encourages the release of endorphins, which can have a therapeutic effect.



SUPPORTING STAFF THROUGH TRAUMA

“ Staff felt listened to. They felt grateful that they could pour out their own feelings and process them in a safe space. It meant that they felt better when returning to their roles and working with patients.”

Those are words of Rhian Chitambo (pictured), learning and engagement lead at North Middlesex Hospital (North Mid), who received specialist training to support colleagues experiencing traumatic or challenging events in the workplace.

She is one of 10 North Mid staff members trained in serious incident aftercare, a programme funded by the Royal Free Charity.

Serious incident aftercare instructors receive in-depth training in critical incident stress debriefing, a recognised method that helps teams process difficult experiences and reduce the risk of long-term emotional strain.

The sessions offer a structured and supportive environment where staff can reflect on how they feel, discuss the impact of the event and, if needed, access further support.

Rhian added: “The debriefs we deliver are an opportunity for staff to process how they felt or continue to feel after the event, as the event will stay with them for a long time.”



A PEACEFUL SPACE FOR CANCER CONVERSATIONS

Receiving difficult news in hospital can be overwhelming for patients and having the right environment can make a big difference.

Thanks to support from Royal Free Charity donors, patients in the gynaecology department at the Royal Free Hospital now have a newly refurbished quiet room - a private, calming space where they can process information with the support of a specialist nurse.

Patients receive a diagnosis or more information about their condition in a clinical room. Then, they can be taken to the quiet room with a cancer nurse specialist for some time to process the news.

Sara Morales Gil, senior gynaecology nurse, said: "Most people don't remember the conversation with the doctor because it's a shock and everything is a blur, and that's completely normal.

"In this room, you allow them a bit of quietness and a minute to think and gather their thoughts. The nurse can give them time and patients won't feel rushed. It feels very personal."

The room has been refurbished with pale green walls, purple chairs, plants and a phone for translation services. A light next to the room's door highlights whether the room is in use to ensure complete privacy.



▲ The new quiet room is a calm space for patients and their specialist nurse.

Azmina Rose, lead for personalised cancer care and head of cancer patient experience, explained: "It's a really good example of the Royal Free Charity stepping in to help with things that the hospital can't fund or deliver ourselves. Staff felt that it was really their project and the Royal Free Charity was enabling it."

Staff at the Royal Free Hospital led the upgrade and the charity paid for the room to be redecorated.



SCALP COOLING KIT REDUCES HAIR LOSS

The Royal Free Charity has funded a scalp cooling machine at Finchley Memorial Hospital to help reduce hair loss during chemotherapy.

The treatment involves wearing a tight cap filled with circulating cold water that turns to ice. Worn before, during and after chemotherapy, the low temperature constricts blood flow to hair follicles, slowing hair loss and encouraging faster regrowth.

Azmina Rose, lead for personalised cancer care and head of cancer patient experience, explained:

"Sometimes the hardest thing for patients is that they have to prepare their young children for the fact that they're going to lose their hair.

"By buying more time for patients before the effects of treatment become apparent, it can help them to prepare their families for what's going to happen. It gives more control over when they have those conversations, which means everything."

The charity previously bought a scalp cooling machine for Chase Farm Hospital.

Azmina added: "The difference that this extra scalp cooling machine has made is phenomenal. We wouldn't have been able to do it without the charity. It's an example of how they help us to go further than we can with NHS funding alone."

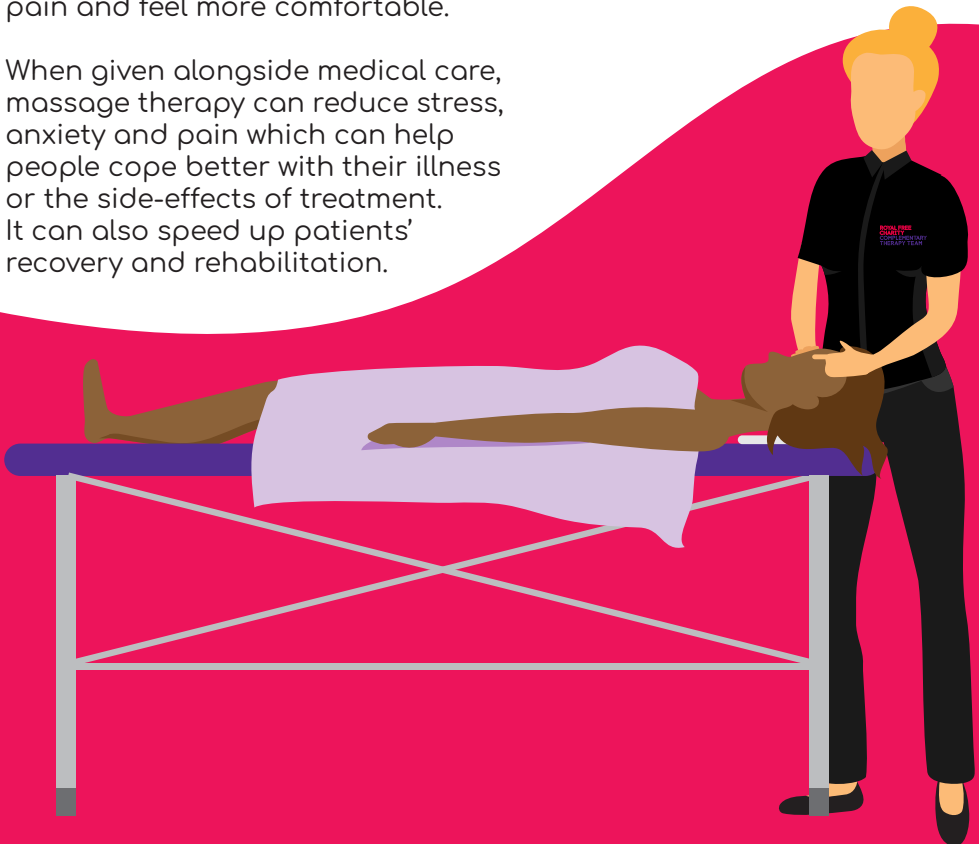
HEALING TOUCH HELPS PATIENTS MANAGE PAIN

Patients undergoing cancer treatment at Chase Farm Hospital are finding relief through massage therapy, thanks to support from the Royal Free Charity.

Funding from a new charity grant for cancer-related projects means a clinical massage therapist visits the hospital's chemotherapy suite every week, helping patients to manage pain and feel more comfortable.

When given alongside medical care, massage therapy can reduce stress, anxiety and pain which can help people cope better with their illness or the side-effects of treatment. It can also speed up patients' recovery and rehabilitation.

Nickie Williamson, charity complementary therapy services manager, said: "Providing massage therapy to patients throughout their cancer journey brings significant and invaluable benefits. It can help manage symptoms like pain, nausea, fatigue and neuropathies as well as having a positive impact on circulation and lymphatic function."



“Every time I received a massage, I felt renewed, despite being very ill. The massage therapist always had words of encouragement, whether she was there for me or another patient. She brightened my day and that meant a lot to me. I cannot express how grateful I am to her.”

Danielle, a patient who received therapeutic massage

“By providing massage therapy, we can improve patients’ quality of life, help with the daily living activities and support their emotional wellbeing by reducing stress and anxiety.

“Our massage therapists provide a sense of connection and comfort. An added bonus is that this treatment is delivered by a recognisable, caring professional with a sunny disposition.”

Fiona Stevenson, massage therapist at Chase Farm and Finchley Memorial hospitals, said: “Helping a patient relax also benefits staff. Some patients arrive feeling anxious, with high blood pressure, and massage helps to calm them before treatment.”

The Royal Free Charity's massage therapy service is funded by supporters. £26 could provide a massage for a patient or member of hospital staff.



▲ Fiona, one of the charity's massage therapists



VIOLIN VIRTUOSO STRIKES RIGHT CHORDS

A violinist who is becoming known internationally is bringing the power of music to the Royal Free Hospital as part of her volunteer work with the Royal Free Charity.

Sakura Mousseigne, who has performed at the Sydney Opera House and Paris Fashion Week, now shares her talent with NHS staff and patients.

Sakura explained: “Music therapy can help relieve pain, reduce anxiety and bring comfort. My goal is to offer patients and their families a moment of escape, reminding them of happy memories.”

Born in Japan, raised in Paris and a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London, Sakura has played the violin since she was three years old.

She said: “Playing for patients and staff is a very special experience. Seeing their smiles, their emotions, watching them dance, or even crying, shows me how deeply music can touch people.

“This unique connection, without words, strengthens my passion and my belief that music has the ability to touch one’s heart and soul. As a professional violinist, I deeply believe in the healing power of music.”

In the hospital, Sakura’s music often draws a crowd, with listeners pausing to enjoy classical and contemporary pieces. After a beautiful rendition of Ave Maria, one patient told her: “Thank you for cheering me up.”



HELPING CANCER PATIENTS STAY WARM AND RESTED

Patients with cancer at the Royal Free London (RFL) receive extra support thanks to charity-funded wellness packs, refreshment vouchers and reading materials.

Wellness packs provide warmth, nourishment and practical items while vouchers and magazines help improve the waiting experience in busy oncology departments.

Azmina Rose, RFL lead for personalised cancer care and head of cancer patient experience, explained: "Cancer patients face disproportionate extra costs during winter. When you lose weight because of cancer, you may need extra layers. If you've taken time off work for treatment, heating bills become an extra cost. The packs are a small help."



▲ More than 200 patients received care packages to support them through colder months.

The packs include:

- warm items like gloves or a blanket
- tea, coffee, hot chocolate and soup sachets
- a thermos flask for hot drinks
- leaflets with support information
- information about the charity's live stream from a nature pond (see back page for details)

Peripheral neuropathy, a side effect of chemotherapy, makes keeping warm essential. "The gloves were particularly appreciated by patients with neuropathy symptoms, which made us realise this should become an annual initiative," Azmina said.

Remo Ferdenzi, cancer information and support centre manager, added: "The soup and flask give warmth and sustain patients while they're waiting for appointments."



▲ Azmina and Remo distribute charity-funded wellness packs to patients.

A comforting gesture

With consultants seeing more than 150 patients daily, waiting times can be long. Patients facing extended waits receive a £3.50 refreshment voucher for the hospital canteen.

“We would love shorter waiting times but systematic factors mean demand is exceeding capacity, Azmina said. “The vouchers don’t make up for the wait but it’s our way of acknowledging the delay and showing we care.”

Light reading

The charity funds regular deliveries of glossy, single-use magazines for the oncology waiting room. Each magazine is coated to reduce the risk of infection and patients can take them home.

Azmina explained: “Some patients may not be able to concentrate on reading a book. The magazines help make what can be quite a sterile-feeling clinical environment feel a little bit warmer and homelier and our patients feel that we really care about their experience.”

LET'S TRY A HEALING EXERCISE

Patients recovering from surgery are rebuilding their strength through rehabilitation sessions at the Royal Free Charity's gym and leisure centre in Hampstead.

Each week, people who have undergone neurological and cardiovascular procedures at the Royal Free Hospital take part in physiotherapy sessions at the Rec Club.

These sessions are designed to support them as they regain mobility, strength and confidence.



▲ Shiji and Jonathan

Jonathan Dryer, who received treatment for an angina attack earlier this year, has been attending cardiovascular rehabilitation sessions since January.

"It's been very helpful," he said. "The sessions give someone who doesn't have access to a personal trainer a circuit to work off and adapt with heavier weights. Now I can do this at home too."

Shiji Samuel, a cardiac rehab specialist nurse, explained the benefits: "The cardiac rehab sessions improve the patient's quality of life, physical strength and endurance, allowing them to participate fully in their daily activities more easily."

"Having a large space in the Rec Club to carry out the programme has been invaluable. We have been able to increase the group size, which has led to a reduction in our waiting list, and the availability of fitness equipment at the Rec Club helps to deliver high-quality exercise sessions."

GEARING UP FOR A GOOD CAUSE

A headmaster and a former England rugby player have taken on the gruelling 'Raid the Pyrenees' challenge for the Royal Free Charity.

Paul Symes and Ben Johnston cycled 780 kilometres from the Atlantic Ocean in Biarritz to the Mediterranean Sea in Cerbère, passing through 18 French mountain passes – many of which feature in the elite Tour de France cycle race.

And here's the catch: they had just 100 hours to complete it.

The pair completed the challenge and raised £8,460.21 for research into neuroendocrine tumours (NETs).

Paul said: "Neuroendocrine cancer is a rare and complex disease, affecting many but often overlooked. It doesn't receive the awareness or funding it needs, and we wanted to change that.

"This ride was not just a physical challenge for us, but a way to show the children I teach and the wider community that anything is possible with the power of friendship and determination.

"As we pushed through every climb and kilometre, we were reminded that our struggles pale in comparison to the battles faced by those living with cancer."

The NET unit at the Royal Free Hospital is internationally renowned. The team's research is supported by funding from the Royal Free Charity, thanks to the generosity of supporters.



▲ Ben and Paul cycled 780 kilometres through gruelling mountain terrain

A LEGACY OF CARE

A lasting gift to the Royal Free Charity will help advance kidney health research and improve care for future generations.

Robin Das, whose two daughters Ratna and Heera were supported by the Royal Free Hospital throughout their treatment for chronic kidney disorders, has pledged to leave a gift in his will in tribute to the two young women.

"We've been looked after well," Robin explained. "That's the reason I put the Royal Free Charity in my will - for future generations. My dream is that my legacy will help advance renal research and bring advantages for patients in the future." Robin hopes this lasting contribution will inspire others to consider how they, too, might make a difference.

"Even little things make a huge difference," he said. "I hope these small gestures encourage others to help where they can."

In keeping with this spirit of giving, Robin and his wife Tripti recently returned to the Royal Free Hospital's renal unit to present their latest donation: a specialist rehabilitation chair dedicated to the memory of their daughters.

The chair will play a vital role in supporting the recovery of renal patients, particularly those transitioning from intensive care. It offers in-built pressure care to protect patients' skin, a tilt-and-space feature to aid comfort and positioning, and support for standing up.

Lisa Ancliffe, clinical lead occupational therapist, explained:



▲ Tripti and Robin Das (left) pictured with Lisa Ancliffe, Dr Vibhash Mishra, Dr Mark Harber and Dr Jenny Cross at the presentation of their latest donation

“This chair will allow us to get more patients out of bed earlier during their recovery, which we know leads to better outcomes, reduced length of stay and fewer complications. This will make all the difference for some patients who currently have to remain in bed due to a lack of suitable seating.”

This is not the first time the Das family has generously donated equipment. In 2024, they donated a massage chair for staff at St Pancras Kidney and Diabetes Centre.

Dr Jenny Cross, consultant nephrologist and medical director at the Royal Free Hospital, expressed her appreciation: “It has been so wonderful to meet Mr and Mrs Das again. Their daughters faced incredible challenges with remarkable strength and resilience.”

“The Das family’s generosity is extraordinary and this chair will have a lasting impact on patient care.”



▲ Robin and Tripti with their daughters Ratna and Heera

Get your free guide to writing your will

Leaving a gift in your will to the Royal Free Charity will ensure they can continue to provide funding and services like those you’ve read about in this magazine – and much more.

You can find out more by im charity’s free wills guide. It explains everything you need to know in a clear, easy-to-read format. You can also find out about free will-writing services.

To request a copy of the guide:
Call 020 7317 7772
Email legacies@royalfreecharity.org

A WINDOW ON THE NATURAL WORLD

Swans, swifts and shovelers are just three of the many species that make their home on Hampstead Heath's ponds. Now, thanks to a partnership between the Royal Free Charity and the City of London Corporation, a live stream from a wildlife pond offers scenes of nature to patients waiting for appointments or undergoing treatment.

A screen in the Royal Free Hospital's oncology outpatient clinic streams the live footage, offering a peaceful moment for waiting patients.

Dr Gillian Smith, chief medical officer of the Royal Free London group of hospitals, said: "We are delighted the charity has supported this novel diversion for patients while they are waiting for what could be a very stressful appointment.

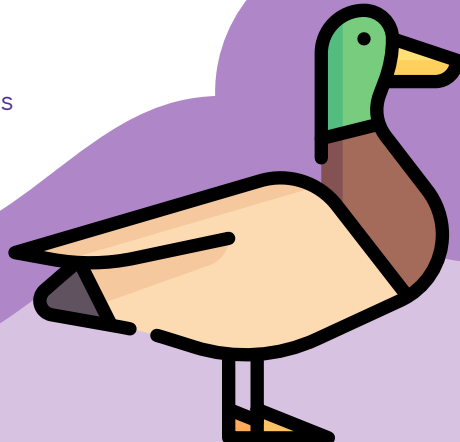
"There is well-documented scientific evidence of the benefits of connecting people to natural environments, whether virtually or directly."



▲ Hampstead Heath pond

The ponds are also home to dragonflies, frogs, toads and newts, which in turn attract grass snake - the closest population to central London.

Anyone can watch the live stream by searching for it on the charity's website: royalfreecharity.org.



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