

## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **Virtual Reality Could Transform Psychological Therapy in the NHS**

A new clinical trial is testing a virtual reality (VR) based psychological therapy for people with severe mental health difficulties. **gameChange** is the largest ever clinical trial of virtual reality for a mental health disorder. Automated delivery of therapy using VR has potential to transform NHS provision of psychological therapy.

There are currently 220,000 patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in contact with mental healthcare services in the NHS in England and Wales. Two-thirds of these patients have levels of anxious avoidance equivalent to people with agoraphobia.

**Daniel Freeman, gameChange lead researcher, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Oxford and Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, said,**

*"The gameChange VR therapy is for people with conditions such as schizophrenia whose fears have caused them to withdraw to such an extent that everyday tasks – such as getting on a bus, doing the shopping, speaking to other people – are a challenge. It aims to help patients re-engage with the world and go into everyday situations feeling more confident, calm and in control."*

Over 400 NHS patients across England (Bristol, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Oxford) will take part in the gameChange clinical trial, which will last 18 months and is funded by the National Institute for Health Research. The purpose of the trial is to find out whether VR therapy works. To do this, half the participants will receive the VR therapy and half will not. A comparison will then be made to see how the people who received VR therapy got on compared to those who did not receive the therapy.

**Professor Freeman continues,** *"We believe that therapy provided in virtual reality can be at least as good, if not better, for some types of mental health problems than the best face-to-face therapies. Experience from the games industry suggests that VR therapies can also be much more enjoyable than traditional treatments – ensuring*

*good take-up and ongoing use of the therapy. The gameChange trial aims to determine whether the promise of success of VR for mental health is true."*

The VR therapy being tested has been created by designers and computer programmers working side-by-side with people with lived experience of psychosis.

**Dr Thomas Kabir, Head of Public Involvement at Mental Health Charity The McPin Foundation, describes the benefits** *"Almost every aspect of the gameChange study has been designed in collaboration with people with experience of psychosis. The result is a study that we hope will be relevant, effective, and accessible and which focuses on helping people with day-to-day social situations"*

It is expected that the VR therapy will lead to patients being more able to go into everyday situations, they will experience fewer/less severe psychiatric symptoms, and that patients feel happier.

**Dr Felicity Waite, Research Clinical Psychologist and NIHR Research Fellow, University of Oxford, explains,** *"In VR we can try out doing things differently because we know it is not real. And yet the learning made in VR transfers to the real world."*

This trial is being funded by the NIHR i4i mental health challenge award and it is also supported by the NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre.

**Martin Hunt, NIHR i4i programme director said** *"Virtual reality therapy for the increasing numbers of people with schizophrenia and related issues could bring very significant benefits both to individual patients and the NHS as a whole. We're really excited about this crucial clinical trial and about the wider potential of VR therapy to help a large number of people re-engage with everyday life."*

Key facts about:

#### **gameChange trial**

- It tackles a serious issue: the social withdrawal of many patients with severe mental health difficulties
- Whether a person has the VR therapy is decided by chance
- Everyone in the trial completes an assessment at the beginning, which is repeated after 6 weeks and again after six months
- Automated therapy means that if the treatment works it will be much easier to help many more patients

#### **VR therapy**

- gameChange is an easy to use, step by step programme that allows a person to practise at their own pace being in a range of everyday situations

- The therapy is provided in 6 thirty-minute sessions in VR
- A virtual coach guides the person in how to overcome their fears
- The virtual coach is animated using motion capture and voices of an actor and provides information on how to overcome anxiety.
- The virtual coach is a calm presence and guides the user through the VR tasks to get the greatest benefit, performing an almost identical role to a real life therapist.
- Patients are willing to enter VR simulations of anxiety-provoking situations because they know the simulations are not real, but what they learn transfers to the real world
- At the beginning of the first session, the virtual coach explains the rationale behind the treatment, and the participant selects which one of six virtual reality situations:
  - Café
  - GP waiting room
  - Pub
  - Bus
  - Street scene
  - Newsagent
- Each scenario has five levels of difficulty (e.g. the number and proximity of people in the social situation increases) and participants work their way through each level of difficulty

There are therapeutic game type tasks within several of the levels - for instance, in one of the tasks in the café scenario, the person catches bubbles blown by a child, encouraging them to get closer to other people.

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**For more information visit the project website: [www.gameChangeVR.com](http://www.gameChangeVR.com)**

## **ENDS**

### **Notes to editor:**

- The treatment was programmed by the University of Oxford spin-out company, Oxford VR, which has a large team of people formerly from the games industry
- A 4 minute video explaining the project is available here <https://youtu.be/D31wodNAMZA> and videos and pictures of the VR treatment are available here <https://www.flickr.com/photos/182007125@N02/>
- A case study of a patient who has been involved in the development of the VR treatment is also available.

- Collaborating trusts (in addition to Oxford) in the trial, lead researchers:
  1. Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust: Prof Anthony Morrison, [tonymorrison@ntlworld.com](mailto:tonymorrison@ntlworld.com), with David Pickthall, Communications Officer, National Institute for Health Research - Clinical Research Network, Greater Manchester, email: [david.pickthall@mft.nhs.uk](mailto:david.pickthall@mft.nhs.uk)
  2. Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust: Dr Robert Dudley, [rob.dudley@ntw.nhs.uk](mailto:rob.dudley@ntw.nhs.uk)
  3. Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust: Dr Kate Chapman, [kate.chapman2@nhs.net](mailto:kate.chapman2@nhs.net)
  4. Nottingham Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust: Dr Eileen O'Regan ([eileen.oregan@nottshc.nhs.uk](mailto:eileen.oregan@nottshc.nhs.uk)), Dr Jen Martin ([jennifer.martin@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:jennifer.martin@nottingham.ac.uk)), Prof Chris Hollis ([chris.hollis@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:chris.hollis@nottingham.ac.uk))
- Quotations from collaborating trusts are available on request.
- Other key collaborators include:
  - The McPin Foundation, who provide PPI, Dr Thomas Kabir, [thomaskabir@mcpin.org](mailto:thomaskabir@mcpin.org)
  - The VR programming was carried out by Oxford VR (Daniel Freeman is the main founder)
  - The Royal College of Art were involved in the treatment design of the gameChange VR therapy. Using a socially-inclusive design process they helped represent patient views in planning what was to be programmed and also helped ensure the usability of the therapy. Contact at the RCA is Jonathan West [jonathan.west@network.rca.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.west@network.rca.ac.uk)
- Key Oxford health and Oxford University contacts for the research:
  - Professor Daniel Freeman, [Daniel.freeman@psych.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Daniel.freeman@psych.ox.ac.uk), overall lead of the project
  - Dr Felicity Waite, [Felicity.waite@psych.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Felicity.waite@psych.ox.ac.uk)
- i4i programme: Andrew Barber [andrew.barber@nihr.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.barber@nihr.ac.uk)

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**Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust (OHFT)** Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust (OHFT) provides physical, mental health and social care for people of all ages across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Swindon, Wiltshire, Bath and North East Somerset. Our services are delivered at community bases, hospitals, clinics and people's homes. We focus on delivering care as close to home as possible.

As a leading teaching, training and research trust, we have close links to Oxford and Oxford Brookes, Buckinghamshire, Reading and Bath universities. We are part of the Oxford Academic

Health Science Centre, working closely with our university colleagues to translate their findings into clinical care as quickly as possible, enabling people using our services to benefit from the latest advances in healthcare.

We host the NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre with Oxford University, and aim to bring the best science to the complex problems of mental disorders and dementia. We also host the Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) Oxford; a partnership between universities, healthcare commissioners and providers, charities and industry targeting health and social care problems in Oxfordshire and the Thames Valley.  
[www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk](http://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk)

**The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)** is the nation's largest funder of health and care research. The NIHR:

- Funds, supports and delivers high quality research that benefits the NHS, public health and social care
- Engages and involves patients, carers and the public in order to improve the reach, quality and impact of research
- Attracts, trains and supports the best researchers to tackle the complex health and care challenges of the future
- Invests in world-class infrastructure and a skilled delivery workforce to translate discoveries into improved treatments and services
- Partners with other public funders, charities and industry to maximise the value of research to patients and the economy

The NIHR was established in 2006 to improve the health and wealth of the nation through research, and is funded by the Department of Health and Social Care. In addition to its national role, the NIHR supports applied health research for the direct and primary benefit of people in low- and middle-income countries, using UK aid from the UK government.

This work uses data provided by patients and collected by the NHS as part of their care and support and would not have been possible without access to this data. The NIHR recognises and values the role of patient data, securely accessed and stored, both in underpinning and leading to improvements in research and care [www.nihr.ac.uk/patientdata](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/patientdata)

**Oxford VR** is a global pioneer in developing leading-edge VR therapy ([www.oxfordvr.org](http://www.oxfordvr.org)). OVR is committed to developing evidence-based, cost-effective, and scalable solutions that build mental health care capacity in primary and secondary care by taking advantage of cutting-edge VR technologies.

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