

Stepped approach to improving sexual function after gynaecological cancer: the SAFFRON feasibility RCT

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Plain English summary

The SAFFRON feasibility RCT

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Plain English summary

Women affected by gynaecological cancer are often unaware of the sexual consequences of the cancer and its treatment. Most do not receive appropriate help to recover sexual function, and the physical and mental impact on their sexuality may be profound. However, several therapies could be effective in helping recovery. A major initial challenge is informing and involving patients appropriately and sensitively, and a further challenge is delivering therapies in busy cancer clinics. This study was conceived in response to the funder's call asking for proposals to improve sexual functioning in women treated for gynaecological cancer while taking into account associated issues of mood. Existing evidence-based therapies for improving sexual function after gynaecological cancer treatment were adapted and a new therapy for complex difficulties was devised. Three levels of intervention were developed and placed into a 'stepped care' model: a self-help intervention, a clinical nurse specialist-delivered intervention and a clinical psychologist high-level intervention for problems not responding to levels 1 and 2. In parallel, an assessment and treatment algorithm was developed to assess women and follow their progress closely to inform whether or not their intervention level should be changed. However, major difficulties were encountered: procedural and logistical delays in setting up the study, both at the beginning across a range of hospitals and, later, at the point of training staff within the NHS to deliver the interventions within their clinical workload. Issues such as maternity leave with untrained locum cover led to nursing staff being unable to free up qualified staff to be part of the study. It is hoped that the existing developments can be tested in a future study to determine (1) if they are effective and (2) whether or not they can be delivered within the NHS.

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