

*Nursing at the*  
**EDGE**



*Pioneering champion  
of partnership*

SHEILA CRON



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Katie Mackinnon shares her story in a matter-of-fact manner. Aged 29 and a recovering heroin addict, she grew up in social care. Her mother, an alcoholic, set the house on fire when she was a toddler “and that was that”. Katie’s first two babies were adopted; her third, a son now aged two-and-a-half, was taken from her at birth, but she has him back now. When we meet, she is 26 weeks pregnant with her fourth child and this time she’s determined that nothing will go wrong.

“I’m doing well,” she says, while painting her nails. “I’m not chaotic any more, even down to the way I eat – my diet used to be crap. It’s good now.”

The scarring visible on Katie’s forearms bears testament to past torment. But she is quietly confident that her future looks bright. Thanks to OWLS, an innovative Perth-based project for female offenders, Katie no longer needs social work support and she’s about to start a training course that will qualify her to become a peer befriender to other women with similar life experience.

“It’s because of this place I’m more positive. They think you can do it,” says Katie. “All the different agencies are here, they’re talking the same language and you’re not having to keep repeating yourself. They care about you.”

OWLS – the One-stop Women’s Learning Service – has been developed to support people like Katie, who have become trapped in the criminal justice revolving door. A sentencing alternative to unpayable fines and damaging prison sentences, it offers women offenders a community-based rehabilitation programme that links them with the health, social care and other support services that might just unlock their problems and offer them a way out for good.

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The project was conceived by the steering group for the Perth & Kinross Complex Case Integration Group (CCIG), made up of representatives from the health service, local authority, drug and alcohol teams, housing and criminal justice. Sheila Cron, one of the founder members, is Head of Nursing for Health Improvement and Inequalities with Perth & Kinross Community Health Partnership.

“It has been amazing to work alongside the range of people who have come together on CCIG,” she says. “We have been able to join up professional silos and pool our skills to make a real difference to the most at-risk people in our community.”

This is the culmination of Sheila’s 41-year career in the NHS, and she says she will be retiring in September on a high. Having started out in Berkshire as a general nurse, then community midwife, she and her husband Danny came to Scotland in the 1990s.

Settling in Pitlochry, Sheila worked as a health visitor and enjoyed providing cradle-to-grave care, “doing things with people not for them, helping people to help themselves.”



She developed an interest in community engagement, and was gradually drawn in to the world of nursing management. Sheila says that her experience as a health visitor meant that she developed a skill set that includes being a shoulder to cry on, a peacemaker and a diplomat – all attributes that have since come in very handy.

Sheila has been involved with the inequalities agenda for the past decade, and since 2011 she has led a team that has helped to transform the experience of some of the most marginalised patients. Perth city's Central Health Care concentrates on addressing the complex health needs of homeless people and the vulnerably housed, hard-to-reach groups such as gypsy travellers, people with drug and alcohol problems and female offenders.

But it does not do it alone. Thanks to the partners involved with CCIG, all the agencies in Perth & Kinross with an interest in addressing the inequalities and lifestyles that put people at risk are working together to powerful effect.

Sheila remembers being particularly impressed by a project in Letham, a pocket of deprivation in Perth & Kinross, where various organisations had come together

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to support people in crisis. “There was one older person, for instance, who liked to drink a lot of vodka and smoked heavily; he was a fire-risk and generally his life was a mess. The challenge was to prevent eviction, and find a way to help,” says Sheila. “There was huge buy-in to sort it out from the police and social work, but health was reluctant to come to the table. So I went along, personally.”

Seeing how effectively a wide range of professionals working together could transform a troubled person’s prospects made Sheila a committed advocate of the concept. “Health can be blinkered because its priorities are so tight and people think they haven’t the time to get upstream and stop problems from happening,” says Sheila. “Once they see the benefits, though, they get it.”

Instead of being derailed by resistance, Sheila and her colleagues have become adept at finding ways round blocks that are put in their path. Indeed, they have pioneered the approach. Since Central Health Care started in 2003 it has seen its resources cut by half, but its workload double. Even the OWLS service has been delivered from existing resources. “It’s about being light on your feet and creative, and using all the help you can get,” says Sheila.

Central Health Care is a nurse-led initiative. “From the start we linked up with social work and housing, and it was the roots of partnership working,” says Sheila. “The concept has grown from there.”

The team now operates out of the Drumhar Health Centre in the heart of Perth city. One of the on-site GP practices is contracted to deliver medical services, and the rest of the 11-strong nurse-led team is dedicated to ensuring that the area’s most vulnerable get the help they need.

“The people we are working with need extra time, and professionals who are comfortable dealing with their problems,” says Sheila. “People delivering care need to be flexible, knowledgeable, approachable and excellent communicators. That takes special skill.”

Partnership working is not an add-on here, but the very core of the service ethos. Chris Lamont, a community psychiatric nurse who has played a big part in the team, says: “The NHS tends to think our way is the right way, but we need to learn that other partners have an awful lot of good ideas too.”

Colin Paton, council team leader for drugs and alcohol, blood-borne viruses and homelessness support, is a founding CCIG member. He says it is good relationships



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that make things happen: “We’ve spent time building trust between us. We listen to each other’s opinions and there is lots of honest dialogue. We respect each other’s roles, and there’s a shared commitment to working together to make things better for the people we serve,” he says. “It really is as simple as that.”

Good-natured banter characterises the CCIG steering group meetings, which often generate exciting outcomes for service development. One of those was OWLS. The project is a response to the 2012 report of the Scottish Government Commission on Women Offenders, chaired by former Lord Advocate Elish Angiolini. That recommended a community-based approach involving a range of agencies working together to divert women from

prosecution and treating the problems that cause them to offend in the first place.

Pamela Banks, head of the social work public protection team in criminal justice at Perth & Kinross, is the OWLS operational lead. “Enabling women to access a nurse at the drop of a hat has been critical,” she says. “Before, it was hard for them to seek medical help. Now they are confident to approach a health professional.”

The women who use OWLS are either released from custody, in the community on licence, or under community payback orders, and their attendance may be a mandatory part of a supervision order. The scheme, which started in February 2013, has also recently been extended to include other vulnerable women.

At present there are 49 women from all backgrounds aged between 16 and 56 using OWLS. Some have been through the courts for shoplifting, assault, drink driving and child neglect; others are at risk of exploitation and domestic violence. Weekly multi-disciplinary group meetings consider individuals’ progress, emerging needs and



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concerns, and regular group meetings bring the women together.

OWLS operates three times a week, with sessions held in different city centre venues. In attendance at each meeting is OWLS nurse Karen Duncan. “At the beginning it was a challenge to get the women to accept me because I was seen as ‘health’ and not to be trusted,” she says. “But I have worked hard to prove that I am on their side, and now the women come to me and ask about all sorts of things.”

As well as offering health checks to new OWLS, Karen liaises between the women and other health services. “People with chaotic lives, as so many of the OWLS women have, aren’t good at keeping appointments, and a lot of them have been banned by GP practices,” says Karen. “I can speak the same language as the doctors and so I act as a bit of a peace negotiator. Now the women are engaging, and serious stuff is being properly dealt with.”

If the OWLS women are pregnant, Karen works with Child Protection services to ensure positive parenting; she gets involved with weight management and activity programmes, and helps the OWLS women to access all the other support that they might need. “It is so fulfilling, I really feel that I am making a difference here,” she says. “Some women have never had people care about them before. It is amazing what a difference a helping hand can make.”

Take Louise, who joined OWLS late last year having been given a 12-month community order at Perth Sheriff Court for drunk and disorderly behavior. “This place has saved me,” she says. “If I’d been given a fine I wouldn’t have been able to pay it, and if I’d been sent to prison I think that would have been the end of me.”

Louise praises the support she has received from Karen, alcohol counsellor Lisa, and criminal justice workers Nicola and Jessica. “They’ve told me so much I never knew – I’m on benefits I didn’t even know existed,” says Louise. “They’ve made me realise that I’ve got to sort myself out. They’re not judgemental. They’re brilliant. Life’s a lot better now.”

Jenna lives in Auchterarder, and travels to Perth to attend OWLS. “This place helps a lot of girls. We’ve all got problems that it’s hard to speak about,” she says. “But you can tell them anything here, and you know they won’t tell half the world.”



Not everyone at OWLS wants to speak to an outsider. But it is obvious that there is a sense of tight community around the tables where women are busy making things and giving each other manicures.

“Many of the women here have never been given the range of support to really sort their lives out,” says Sheila. “That’s what makes OWLS different.”

The innovation that OWLS represents has recently been recognised with a Perth & Kinross Council ‘Securing the Future’ award for customer focus, which credits the value of the project’s holistic approach. It is the women themselves who decided that they wanted to engage in activities such as cycling, and to learn first aid, parenting skills and cookery, and it was they who changed the project’s original name from ‘Offending Women’s Learning Service’ to ‘One-stop’.

“It is a cause of great satisfaction for me that they had the confidence to suggest that,” says Sheila. “It is their ownership of their lives that is going to make the biggest difference to them in the long run. If I have had a small part to play in that, then I can retire happy.” ■

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