Virtual reality treatment at new CAMHS unit

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It has been announced today that Cornwall's very first Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) unit will feature a sensory room to host innovative virtual reality environments to help young people during periods of emotional distress.

Ahead of the NHS Five Year Forward View, the new 14 bed Sowenna unit means that soon children and adolescents will have access to specialist mental health beds in the county. This initiative delivers on NHS England's commitment to reduce out of area placements for children and young people by increasing bed numbers nationally by 10%.

Virtual reality (VR) is not just being used for gaming. Already studies have shown that VR can be beneficial in helping to treat a whole-host of mental health conditions, including easing phobias, treating post-traumatic stress disorder, helping to lessen paranoia in psychotic disorders and reducing social anxiety.

With young British adolescents having been deemed "extreme internet users", using technological advances will provide a unique opportunity to engage young people in with their treatment and potentially revolutionise the way in which young people can manage their mental health.

Young people in Sowenna will be offered a choice of guided mindfulness exercises with a member of staff or the use of the VR sensory environment as part of their treatment. They will be able to touch, feel, walk around or even lie down during their five minute long experience, which will be supervised by a clinician at all times.

Patients will be asked to fill in a short questionnaire before about how they are feeling and then again afterwards. The work undertaken will be supported by a research study to determine whether this new method of mindfulness has had a significant improvement in the mental wellbeing of the young person.

The work to develop the VR project is being undertaken by Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (CFT) who will be running Sowenna and Falmouth University who will supply the technical environments. Triangular Pixels of Bude have been appointed build specialists for the VR environments, and Young People Cornwall, who have been instrumental from the start of the Sowenna build, will be co-designing the VR sensory environments and providing the user experience group.

"The purpose is to use the sensory environments to help young people tackle their mental health issues in a more effective way than ever before. By creating the VR sensory environments, patients are able to experience more calming surroundings to help them deal with the issues that they face. We would expect patient's heart rates and anxiety levels to be lowered at a faster rate than the traditional time spent in a static sensory environment" commented Dr Liz Myers, CFT's Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist/Clinical Director of Children's Services.

The sensory room build and VR project will cost £25,000. It has been generously funded by The Invictus Trust, VerseOne and Carew Pole Trust.

To find out more about virtual reality at Sowenna, please watch this video:

<iframe width="500" height="281" src="//www.youtube.com/embed/m7l7b5zqpCE" frameborder="0" allowfullscreen=""></iframe>

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