

Press statement from

**The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice in the UK**

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## **NHS couple counselling plans 'alarming' as well as 'heart-warming'**

Government plans to offer couple counselling on the NHS for people with depression are 'heart warming in some ways, and alarming in others', say leading therapists working with children, couples and families.

The plans are to be outlined by Health Secretary Andy Burnham, in a speech in London on Thursday (November 26) to the New Savoy Partnership, a group of organisations aiming to improve access to psychological therapies in the NHS.

Commenting on the announcement, Dorothy Ramsay, chair of AFT, the UK's leading organisation for family therapists and other professionals working with couples and families, said: 'On the plus side is its recognition that caring relationships are fundamental to well-being and recovery. It also acknowledges that the Government has been short-sighted in supporting one form of individual therapy (CBT) at the expense of others necessary to meet the diverse needs of adults, children and families. This shift in Government understanding is to be applauded.

'What alarms is the sense that effective and safe couple therapy for people experiencing mental health difficulties can be provided by offering 'some additional training to existing therapists' and more 'joined up working' [1]. That, of course, depends on what trainings are to be offered to whom, and what supports and referral routes will be available to staff when they find themselves working with people experiencing serious relational problems and other difficulties they are insufficiently trained to support or even recognise.

'Research is clear – experienced and skilled therapists can help couples and families turn their lives around and save the NHS and other public services a fortune in the long run. [2] Systemic family psychotherapists working in the NHS, for example, are highly skilled in working with children and adults and their important relationships. They understand how children's problems can impact on couples and couples' problems can impact on children. They work with couples and families experiencing serious problems, and can supervise, train and take referrals from those with lesser trainings. Yet there are still services and areas of the UK with frighteningly few of these highly skilled professionals in post. Some have none at all.

'So yes, let's make the most of those NHS staff who already have high quality systemic trainings to work with couples and other family groups. Let's expand these trainings. Let's celebrate any shift in the ethos that was squeezing therapies other than CBT out of the NHS. And for goodness sake let's ensure there are sufficient fully qualified clinicians in key posts to ensure this is an effective and safe service for vulnerable couples and their children.'

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

- For further information, please contact AFT Communications Officer, Jan Parker, on 07931 726247
- AFT, is the UK's leading body for professionals working therapeutically with families. Visit [www.aft.org.uk](http://www.aft.org.uk),
- 1: Department of Health spokeswoman, commenting on plans. See, for example, <http://www.nursingtimes.net/whats-new-in-nursing/mental-health/nhs-will-provide-relationship-counselling-to-depressed-couples/5008824.article>
- 2. See, for example,  
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Crane, D. R. and Payne, S. H (2008). Individual and family therapy in managed care: Comparing the costs of treatments by the mental health professions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.  
Leff, J., Vearnals, S., Brewin, C. R., Wolff, G., Alexander, B., Asen, E., Dayson, D., Jones, E., Chisholm, D. and Everitt, B. (2000). "The London Depression Intervention Trial: Randomised controlled trial of antidepressants v. couple therapy in the treatment and maintenance of people with depression living with a partner: clinical outcome and costs". *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177, 95-100