

Cafe Connect_Episode 11.wav

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:00:10] Hello and welcome to this new episode of Café Connect, where we bring you the latest research from the University of Aberdeen. My name is Barbara Gorgoni and I'm part of the Public Engagement with Research Unit here at the University. In this series, we meet different researchers who talk about their projects and their relevance to our life. If you have any questions, we would love to hear from you. Please email peru@abdn.ac.uk and we will put your questions and comments to our speakers. Keep in mind, however, that they won't be able to answer any personal or medical questions. So today, I am delighted to welcome Dr Kathryn Martin, lecturer in the Institute of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Aberdeen, and Marjory D'Arcy, Chair of Grampian 50 Plus Network. They will discuss the role of older people walking groups before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. So welcome both. And I will hand over now to Kathryn, who will get us started with talking a little bit about the benefits of walking.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:01:33] Thanks, Barbara. So really, I think no one can dispute the fact that there are great benefits for being physically active. I mean, it's very important in terms of improving health outcomes. So it helps to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes and even some cancers and it really does help control body weight and makes people have a better mood, if you will, and has overall wellbeing and health-related quality of life benefits. So walking is really an ideal exercise because it is a moderate to vigorous activity. It is low-impact and generally safe and accessible at any age and really comes with a pretty low-price tag, so you can get out and go for a walk for little to no cost. So I guess really, when we think about those benefits of walking, we think about how it improves physical functioning and especially for older adults, improving things like balance and gait. And I mentioned before about maintaining a healthy body weight, so it helps with weight loss and weight maintenance, which is particularly important. And here in Scotland, physical inactivity is still really a major challenge, so we want to be getting more of the population out, more people active and there have been a number of Scottish government guidelines that have been set up, implementation plans for physical activity. But also it was one of the very first, I think, in the world to develop a national walking strategy about 5, 6 years ago now and that was really to promote walking on a daily basis. So I'm particularly interested in research that focuses on older adults, but also individuals who have arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions like chronic pain and ways in which walking can be beneficial for those populations because of its low impact, its accessibility and its low cost. Everyone likes to get out and go for a nice walk, especially if it's around, I suppose, nature and trees or down by the seaside. There's always something to look at and it is really quite mood lifting. So I was really pleased actually to have been approached. So a colleague and myself have been approached by the Grampian 50 Plus Network, so that's where Marjory enters the picture. It was about 2019, the fall of 2019 when Marjory, who's Chair of the Grampian 50 Plus Network, got in touch to see whether or not there might be some research projects and I was able to start chatting with her about what the network does and how big they are, it's quite extensive throughout the northeast of Scotland. Marjory, do you want to say a little bit about the network and sort of its reach and maybe even a little bit about the history of it?

Marjory D'Arcy [00:04:49] Hello. Yes, I think Grampian 50 Plus Network was actually set up in 1998, but in actual fact, it came from an idea way back in the early 80s. When working in education, we became aware there were lots of opportunities for younger adults, but when it came to older adults, there were many fewer. And unless you were confident enough to join an

extramural class at the University or you were an avid Twist player or footballer, that really wasn't very much. Particularly the pensioner type groups were very popular and all that happened is that people came along, sat down on the seat, were entertained, you have the cup of tea and sent home again. And as a community education worker felt that there was more to life than this and these people should get opportunities to do other things. So by about 1985, I, along with two colleagues, decided we would try to do a little project to set up three walking groups for some of these people. It was very informal, very non-threatening and these three groups in Aberdeen got set up. And people just love being able to go out, perhaps in a minibus with other people, go to the countryside, just do a gentle walk. And this really was where we all came from. I have to say my colleagues then didn't think this was going to work, but after a few years, they were actually very keen to set up groups in their own areas. So that's really where it came from. And by about mid-late 80s, this was becoming really quite popular. In 1985, we decided we'd take some of these people on a five-day away trip called Discovering New Horizons, and we just invited people to come and enjoy the outdoors. Little did they know that without any pressure at all, but a lot of encouragement, they would spend the week walking, going in chairlifts, going in a canoe, going in a dinghy, doing all sorts of things. And they really got so much out of it, they said more people have got to get this opportunity. So these courses actually run two a year for many years and that was very successful and also helped to increase friendships because people came from different parts of what was Grampian. By about 1990, very quickly, we had about 40, 50 walking groups in Grampian and we brought them together for a big rumpus rendezvous hold at a National Trust property. And we had 200 people and it was the beginning of an event that happens still, every year. We run it over two days now, people can only come one day or the other because we have so many people. We developed a week of walks so that people could learn new walks. We produced an agenda newsletter, which is run by volunteers, as is the whole organisation now. And then in the mid-90s, we became very aware that having involved lots of these people in events, it was maybe time for these people, older people, to take on the running of this organisation. We set up the network in 1998 and this is going from strength to strength. I mean, we get hundreds of people that come to events. We offer training, we offer small conferences, just all sorts of opportunities that people really, really enjoy. So the committee's overrun by volunteers and it continues to go on.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:09:17] And am I right that now the network is about 1300 members strong?

Marjory D'Arcy [00:09:21] It's between 1200 – 1300 and we have just under 60 groups from across Grampian. You know, some of these groups are very small, maybe have 8 or 9 members. Some groups have 50 or 60 members and they use a coach when they go out, although when they get to the point of walks, there are usually 2 or 3 options to meet the abilities. Most of it is not really hard walking, although the fitter ones will obviously have harder walks than the others.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:09:57] So when we started chatting, it was last year this time. We were thinking about projects for the network, we were thinking really about getting into sort of the nuts and bolts, worrying about trying to evaluate the network and thinking about how individuals were using the network and what might be coming down the future for the network as well. So understanding a little bit more about how the committee operates and I guess thinking about sustainability of the network. Well, you started 20 years ago and maybe folks have been ageing and trying to recruit new members and thinking about that membership in terms of socio-demographics in which those walks are located. So we had started to develop a Master's project that was going to investigate some of these, thinking about the perceptions of participants in

terms of programme access and what elements they thought made the network successful and to think about some of their expectations and the motivations for joining the network. And then all of a sudden COVID hit and it really derailed everything, not in the sense that what the project sort of has come to be has in any way been diminished, actually COVID enhanced the working relationship between myself and the network. But I suppose our student's project really changed and shifted because she was meant to go out and meet with the groups and have walk alongs to be able to have these conversations. But obviously with lockdown and COVID, that wasn't going to be able to happen. So she very, very adeptly learnt a lot, she switched to doing things online and interviewing a lot of the people who came forward to participate in some of her focus groups. And that was really, I think, wonderful and she had a really great experience with that. But one of the things that we got talking about, didn't we, Marjory, was the opportunity to understand how the network and its members might actually fare during the pandemic. And there was a call from the Chief Scientist Office, the CSO, looking for COVID related grants. So we were really interested in understanding more about how lockdown could impact on individuals who are so social, actually thinking about people who normally are used to getting out and going for these walks with their groups and not having that because everything has sort of stopped. So we submitted the grant and it was approved. And at the time thought we would also be thinking about trying to understand the impact of these restrictions, like the state health measures and gathering limits, but also things about wearing face masks and trying to keep a two- metre distance because that was all sort of new to everyone at the time. And we also wanted to better understand reports of help-seeking behaviour. So accessing NHS, understanding reports of loneliness and wellbeing, and how people were able to manage their physical activity, keeping up with their walking or other types of activities. And we also had some questions about public health messaging, which was important to us to understand how the messages were being received and perceived by folks in this group. So we did three surveys in June, July and August, and we also had a group of individuals take part in some in-depth interviews. Marjory and the network was heavily involved in the process, everything was being run, I think, out of homes at the time because we weren't allowed into the office. It was a busy time, wasn't it?

Marjory D'Arcy [00:14:32] Yeah, I think it was such a pity that the student didn't get the opportunity to actually do the walk alongs with different groups, because I think it may be that there might have been very different outcomes. But because it was all done virtually, if you like, I think some people would not have contributed because they probably didn't feel it was for them and it may have attracted more confident people to take part and that doesn't detract from what actually happened. But I do think if the student had been able to reach a wider group of people and speak with them informally, as well as enjoy the wonderful countryside that we have then it might have been a bit different. I do think that being a member of these walking groups probably helped people during COVID because they know what it's like to feel good after a walk, to have a chat with somebody, just the whole benefits of walking that you described earlier. So I think they network quite often. They have telephone connections, they speak to one another or new friends on telephones just to check how people are. Some of the groups have dedicated leaders, they have been phoning people, and just making sure, they're up to date. The network itself has continued to produce its newsletters, which is called The AGENDA with each capital letters. And we've been really interested because we invited members to send us information about what they'd been doing during COVID. We've had some lovely, lovely stories of what they've done, how they have adapted. So I think that really helped some.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:16:43] So we had about 350 participants take part in the first survey in June. Then we followed those individuals in July and August and actually we saw that this group of

individuals were meeting or exceeding the recommended physical activity guidelines. So that is 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity activity each week. So that was very high compared to what we might typically see in the national population level data for older adults. And actually, while the network walks did shut down during lockdown, people were reporting that they were walking as their primary form of exercise and they were actually putting in more housework and gardening. So we see the importance of physical activity within this group. People were maintaining that and taking advantage of getting out for as much exercise as possible. But as the months went on and as the restrictions eased, there was a slight lessening of reports of that level of physical activity. So where people were maybe taking advantage of that one hour a week or a day of getting out and being active, as restrictions eased and people are able to meet up and go to the shops again and to do other things it's possible that, your day and your routine changes a bit. So one of the people we had interviewed had indicated about how that pattern had changed over time. We saw that there was an evolution of walking groups and what the walking groups were offering at different times. And so while the restrictions and the guidelines had rolled in, the function of the walking groups had changed. So we actually saw that during lockdown, while groups weren't actually meeting for organised walks, many groups were still maintaining a social element by providing social contact or support, either meeting virtually or keeping in contact via email or telephone.

And that was really important and reported by a lot of participants that was really sort of a benefit, that they kept them sort of going and seeing their walk group members or hearing from them. When lockdown started to ease after mid-July, some groups were starting to maybe restart modified format, really limited by size and location and a lot of these were happening outside of the city of Aberdeen. And that in large part because Aberdeen went back into a lockdown, didn't we, at the beginning of August for pretty much all of August. So there's this importance of observing social distancing measures and reducing some of the socialisation that might happen. And we heard from folks who were taking part in the interviews, but also from some of the spaces on the surveys, where we gave them an opportunity to do some free text writing about their experiences, that transport and taking public transport will be a big issue moving forward with trying to take part in their normal walking groups. Getting to places is going to be an issue if they don't drive themselves or if they've previously relied on public transport or a ride from a friend or a family member. And Marjory, as you mentioned about the coaches, you know, some groups will hire big coaches to go out and get their members to a walk in maybe a bit more of a remote or rural location. And COVID has definitely changed that, hasn't it? And how people are engaging with their walking groups surely has changed over time. But the one thing that's remained constant is the need and the desire for people to continue to try and meet, even if it's in a modified format.

Marjory D'Arcy [00:21:13] Yes, I think it's interesting that people have been continuing to walk, but I think they're walking so much in the same area that they live in. I think they've explored every nook and cranny of every street and paths and everything else. But obviously, following Government and Sport Scotland guidelines, some groups are back walking. Some walking in very small groups, still walking locally because if everybody takes a car there are limited number of places where you can park all these cars, it's also obviously an issue for people who don't have transport, as you say, and many are wary about using public transport. But I think the will is there definitely, everyone you meet says when will the groups be starting, you know? So I think people are remaining positive and realistic. I don't know whether that's an age thing or not, that well, when it changes, it changes and we look forward to that.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:22:19] I think overall what we were seeing with the help-seeking behaviour was that folks were really not willing or they were demonstrating that the likelihood of them accessing health care advice, should it be needed, was lower than what we had anticipated. Some of that could have been the public health messaging, but also maybe just the unknown with Coronavirus and not wanting to go to places where, you may be more likely to pick it up and you wouldn't want to necessarily burden the health care service if it wasn't absolutely necessary. But we did see the likelihood of accessing different services sort of change over time and that, of course, was with restrictions lifting and things like that. So people were saying that they would definitely speak to their friends and family members if they had any queries. Some people in the interviews actually had been accessing services routinely and were understanding and pretty flexible with the fact that things have to change in you accessing the services. And some found it very, very straightforward and easy. So those sorts of things, I think were interesting to hear and of course, we're still in a state at the moment where a lot of services have been suspended or there's now going to be quite a delay to get back in and see a consultant, if you will, and specialist care. Hopefully as we move forward, that will be something that, again, will be ironed out.

Marjory D'Arcy [00:24:10] Yes, I think I think many people felt that they wouldn't contact the health services unless it was really necessary because they felt that it was a great pressure on the services because of COVID itself. I think that may be the main part of that.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:24:33] One of the other findings that we were looking at was the impact of COVID restrictions and these guidelines on loneliness and wellbeing, and actually among the individuals who took part in the surveys, we found that rates of loneliness were lower than expected, it should be said. So we know from the literature that rates of loneliness can be quite high, especially among folks who live alone and older adults and you can see that prevalence of figures of loneliness varies depending on the scales you use and who's being surveyed and whatnot. But we found that those levels of loneliness were about 30% to 23%, lessened as the months went on. And again in August, where some of the restrictions had been lifted for outwith Aberdeen City.

We saw that folks actually had very good levels of wellbeing and they were reporting very high levels of social contact with family or friends not living with them. They were maintaining those relationships either in person, by telephone, video calls or text and emails. They were trying as much as possible to reach out and to have those interactions. But most people did express feelings of frustration and really feeling as if they wanted to be able to be with their loved ones and their friends and to be doing the normal routine. And so while things had changed, they were thankful that there were these other options to maintain the relationships. But it was mixed, I think not everyone obviously likes being online or video chats. You do what you have to do to see your grandchildren, I think. Right?

Marjory D'Arcy [00:26:48] Yeah, I think the experience of the past nine months is very important. It'd be very interesting to see how the network copes with this weather, people have been looking forward to it so much and that the groups will immediately come back to life again and all will be well, we're quite used to getting between 200, 300, 400 people becoming involved in projects. Now, will people be wary about that? I'm not sure, but I think most groups will return and I think people might bring their friends or some people they've met out walking everyday with the same people and on the same walks. We may have to get some help to set up some new groups to cope with demand, probably in areas where there aren't established groups. Obviously, we would welcome any new members. We will be updating our publicity leaflet, which hopefully we will circulate early in the spring. We've got a website, we've got a Facebook page, but I think word of

mouth is most effective. I think I should mention that Health walks have been very successful and most of them are back walking. Many of the health walks are led by members of our working groups and the idea is that once people may move between the health walk to one of our walking groups because we tend to go further afield. But it is about everyone, I think, just doing their part to make a difference. On the other hand, people might feel the network has lived its life and maybe they don't need it anymore. And if that's the case, then that's fine. If what we've done over the years has encouraged hundreds, maybe thousands of older people to enjoy walking and all the benefits that come with it, then, you know, that's been a success. But I don't think it will go that way, but who knows? Time will tell.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:29:06] I would hope that the network wouldn't necessarily go quietly into the night. I think that what the research that we've done with you and particularly around the COVID research has actually shown that, while we didn't measure resilience in a research capacity way, but the levels of loneliness and the well-being that was demonstrated in the group and even the numbers of chronic conditions are sort of lower than the average population. Again, could be the people who actually participated in the surveys rather than representing the whole network. But there's something about being part of these groups that does seem to have maybe mitigated the impact of COVID-19, the restrictions and being in lockdown. And I think that's evidence in a way that the network has or the walking groups have evolved and supported individual members. And it's there in a time of sort of crisis, if you will, everyone came together and supported one another in whatever ways and encouraged them to continue with their walking. And I think that has definitely helped to dampen the impact that might have been seen had that not been there. And I don't know if you're aware, but the Scottish government just this week has released £6 million of additional funding to help tackle isolation, social isolation and loneliness. Because this is real and it's really important and this is where physical activity and social support mix in these walking groups. And I think they're vital and I would love to see that you needed to expand and add additional walking groups. And for the network to continue to grow and attract younger members so that they age gracefully and they continue with their physical activity and their mental wellbeing can be enhanced over these years by those additional friendships.

Marjory D'Arcy [00:31:24] Yes. I mean, I think that we have all the wonderful words about social isolation, loneliness, wellbeing, etc . But it's really very difficult to explain, people say to me after the walk with my walking group, I just feel so good after I've had a walk, I've been speaking to other people and enjoying the countryside, we've had great laughs, great chats and I really just feel quite energised at the end of it. And I think if you multiply that by all the members, we've got this positive view of the benefits of being part of the group and doing things with the group, perhaps not just with walking. I know lots of groups organised a few days to a week, either self-catering, in the hotel or whatever suits them just to develop more as a group and it's just been a great success, I think.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:32:25] Well, thank you so much, Marjory. That's really wonderful. And what you have actually set up all those years ago, 20 years ago, would you ever imagined we'd be here today looking at this? And there's been a global pandemic, you know, and when you set up these ventures, you never know what difference it's going to make down the line. So I think it's wonderful. And thank you for allowing us in, as a research team to come in and be a part of that. It takes a lot of trust, I think, on the behalf of a community organisation to do that. And I've been essentially working very closely with you all those months back and forth with different surveys to review and the mailings, and it just was a wonderful experience for me. I hope that it's made a difference and it will be a benefit to the group as well.

Marjory D’Arcy [00:33:22] Thank you very much. We've enjoyed it and I think there's a benefit to everybody that will come from it. So thank you.

Dr Kathryn Martin [00:33:30] Thank you. We're looking forward to the next thing, but hopefully it won't be another sort of global pandemic, we've had enough of that now. I think Barbara's been giving us a sign.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:33:41] Thank you. Thank you very much. It's been really a fascinating discussion and insight into how this particular group of people have worked together. But I just have a quick question, because you mentioned the website and a Facebook page. So if people wanted to join the network, what would they have to search for? How would they do that?

Marjory D’Arcy [00:34:08] Well, basically, they just need to search “Grampian 50 Plus Network” and the website will come up. The Facebook is also “Grampian 50 Plus Network” and there is a contact there. If anybody wants to join a group, they get in touch with the email address and we will try to link them with an appropriate group in the appropriate area.

Dr Barbara Gorgoni [00:34:32] Excellent. Thank you very much. And thank you again both for taking part in our Café Connect. And so, to our listeners, remember that if you have any questions for our speakers, please email us at peru@abdn.ac.uk and keep your ears open for our next Café Connect podcast. Thank you for listening and goodbye.

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