

Spotlight on Sarah Polack – championing inclusive dementia research in coastal communities



Sarah Polack, a Senior Research Fellow at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS), has been a part-time Dementia Community (DEMCOMM) Fellow for two years, focusing her research on the experiences of people with dementia living alone in coastal and rural areas of Kent and Sussex. With a background in global health and a passion for tackling health inequalities locally, Sarah's work emphasises social connection and inclusive support.

How long have you been in this role? What does it involve?

I've been in this part-time role for two years. My main research focus has been on understanding the needs and experiences of people with dementia who live alone in coastal and rural areas of Kent and Sussex, with a particular emphasis on social connection and access to support.

Additional aspects of my role include:

- Collaborating with other Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS) DEMCOMM fellows - we support each other's projects, for example working together on systematic reviews, developing project proposals, and organising public engagement events.
- Engaging with the wider DEMCOMM network, participating in regular meetings, retreats, collaborating on funding applications and through special interest groups (SIG). For example, I'm part of a research and practice in homecare SIG and we recently organised a public event aimed at strengthening partnerships between researchers and homecare providers.
- Supporting the capacity-building of others: I line-manage a brilliant research assistant and mentor a community researcher. I also contribute to teaching, MSc student supervision and PhD student annual reviews, at BSMS.

What made you apply for the DEMCOMM fellowship?

I've been lucky to spend much of my career in global health research, collaborating with partners in low- and middle-income countries on research focused on health equity and social inclusion for disabled people. Over time, I felt increasingly drawn to working more locally, especially in underserved coastal areas, to tackle health inequalities and promote inclusive, community-based support. The DEMCOMM Fellowship jumped out as a great opportunity to engage in applied, inclusive local research aimed at improving health and social outcomes for people with dementia. I was particularly interested in addressing growing issues of loneliness. I was also excited by ARC KSS commitment to working in partnership with people affected by dementia.



How easy did you find the process?

The process was straightforward. I applied via a job advert and was interviewed. I was well supported in the early months, through meetings with ARC KSS, other research fellows, the Dementia Consultation Group and colleagues from the Centre for Dementia Studies to help shape my research proposal and build connections. I attended the first national DEMCOMM meeting in my very first week which was very inspiring

Where did you find out about it?

The position was advertised on the BSMS website.

What has this fellowship enabled you to do?

It has enabled me to build networks, expand my research skills and learn! I've gained valuable experience in qualitative research methods and creative approaches to public engagement, as well as starting to develop a track record in research on dementia, health inequalities in coastal communities and loneliness which I am excited to build on.

What have been the highlights of the project?

Working with people affected by dementia has been a major highlight, including through project advisory groups, visiting study participants in their homes for interviews and at public engagement events - it's been a real privilege and I've learnt so much. Earlier this year, we (ARC KSS DEMCOMM fellows) co-organised a research and art public engagement event for Dementia Action Week. We worked with two amazing artists who led art workshops with people with dementia exploring what social connection and support means to them, and their artworks and stories were showcased in public exhibitions and a webinar.

What have been the challenges?

I faced some delays in research processes, particularly with ethical approvals and participant recruitment. But there is always learning in every challenge.

What kind of support did you get?

The DEMCOMM network provides great support, through regular meetings, peer learning, and retreats. I have also benefited from the support and expertise of colleagues at ARC KSS and Centre for Dementia Studies.

What happens next?

I will be writing up and disseminating my research findings, hoping to raise awareness and inform systems and services to better meet the needs of people living alone with dementia. I am finishing my fellowship at the end of October but excited to continue to build on the skills, experiences and collaborations in future research on dementia and social inclusion.



What advice would you give someone looking to take part in research who has never done research before?

Work on a topic you care about! Get support and collaborate; find a support network – whether that is colleagues you feel comfortable with, a mentor, line manager. Research can be hard, but you don't have to go it alone. Be patient and open to learning - good research takes time. Involve experts by experience from the start. There is so much value and joy in the shared learning public involvement brings, and it helps ensure the research is relevant and impactful.

What qualities do you think you need to be a good researcher?

Curiosity, patience, commitment, and a willingness to listen, adapt, and keep learning.