

# My practice

We talk to Karen Hooton about her long career in complementary therapy, her award-winning community outreach work, and the satisfaction she finds in working with a wide range of clients



Originally a children's nurse, clinical aromatherapist Karen Hooton, who is also qualified in homeopathy, reflexology, Reiki and nutritional

therapy, has had a long and varied professional career. She has run her own successful practice since qualifying and her current special interests are in fertility, pregnancy and children. From 2003 to 2016 Karen worked with Midlothian Sure Start, bringing her knowledge and skills to outreach work in the community.

## Could you tell us about your background?

When I was growing up I was always interested in nature, an interest that was fostered by my family. Unfortunately, I was quite unwell throughout my childhood because I had asthma and full body eczema that kept me off school for long periods of time.

We found that going for walks in the woods helped me to breathe more easily and, as we walked, we looked at the variety of plant and animal life. Both my mother and grandmother had a great interest in nature and helped me with the identification of plants and animals. I also had many reference books, received as birthday and Christmas presents, and these books are still in use today for both my aromatherapy and homeopathic practice.

When I finished high school my reports stated that I wouldn't achieve much since I was dyslexic and an under-achiever! However, despite the school's predictions, I held on to my long-cherished wish to be a nurse and in 1986 I was accepted onto the Registered Sick Children's Nursing course at Edinburgh's Royal Hospital for Sick Children.

The training was four to six weeks in college and then three months hands-on learning in the wards (often in at the deep end) and this pattern continued for three years until I qualified in 1989. In those days trainee nurses were rather scared of Matron but her strict training gave me, for example, the stringent cleaning skills I need in my own business today to keep my clients safe.

## What sparked your interest in aromatherapy?

In 1989 my mother passed away due to cancer, one month before I passed my nursing finals, so she didn't get to see me qualify. Fifteen months later I found myself as a single parent with the birth of my son. At that time it just wasn't possible to work 12-hour shifts as the childcare was not available and I had no close family to help out.

When my son was two years old, I started my journey into complementary therapies. I began with a night class to see what I would like to do and I really enjoyed learning about aromatherapy and holistic care. Aromatherapy was still fairly new at that point and not many people had heard of it.

I needed to find a course that fitted round childcare options and,

unfortunately, this can still be a barrier to people learning today. I found the Scottish School of Aromatherapy in Glasgow which ran courses during the week and my learning began in earnest. The range of available books on aromatherapy was limited then but I used classics such as *The Fragrant Pharmacy*, *Aromatherapy A-Z*, *The Art of Aromatherapy* and the Shirley Price *Aromatherapy Workbook*.

While I was in training the standards were being updated so I also had the pleasure of being taught by Len and Shirley Price for my ISPA (International Society of Professional Aromatherapists) upgrade course.

## How has your aromatherapy career developed?

With aromatherapy still in its infancy at the beginning of my career it was hard to set up a business because people didn't really know what you were offering. But, since it went alongside massage, people accepted it as part of a massage treatment. In the first few years I offered evening appointments at my home and I had quite a few regulars. When I moved house most followed me: one of my clients has been with me for 26 years!

I worked from home for a couple of years until my son went to school. Then I looked for some daytime work and found a local salon to work in, offering a mix of complementary therapies and beauty therapies. I carried on with my clients at home a few nights a week after my son had gone to bed, so I was working long days!

My next step was to complete a City and Guilds Adult Education

course, to allow me to teach aromatherapy for local authority day and evening classes. I taught those classes for about 20 years, along with a few weekends of teaching at ESHA (Edinburgh School of Holistic Aromatherapy), helping to train the next aromatherapists.

I continued building my aromatherapy practice alongside working part-time at Midlothian Sure Start as my clients continued to require treatments. However, in 2016 I became completely self-employed and I now run a thriving business where approximately half my hands-on therapy time is spent giving aromatherapy massages (I also offer reflexology) to those who are stressed and have back issues due to working at a desk, poor posture and not having the time to relax or exercise.

I am also lucky that, in non-Covid-19 times, I work at a medical practice in East Lothian, giving the surgery staff much-needed time out and therapeutic touch, as part of their staff well-being programme. Anyone can access a session, from the Practice Manager and GPs to the reception staff and practice nurses. I also work for Held in Our Hearts (formally SANDS Lothians) providing therapies around Mother's Day, Baby Loss Awareness day, and I provide therapy to runners at the end of the Edinburgh Marathon - always a humbling experience.

#### **What was your role at Midlothian Sure Start?**

After obtaining my degree in Homeopathy in 2002, I secured a job at Midlothian Sure Start (MSS) as their Complementary Therapy Co-ordinator. I brought four therapies to the organisation and delivered these therapies to parents and occasionally to children, both one-to-one and in groups at MSS centres across Midlothian.

Funnily enough, my groups were very popular with stressed out parents! The parents wanted to learn about the essential oils and how to use them safely on themselves and on their children. The class the mothers most enjoyed was making up salt bottles with their own choice of essential oils to take away and sniff

when they felt the need. They also enjoyed making their own bath and shower blends and body lotions. The making of the 'smelly things' acted as a 'carrot' to get them to attend the groups. In the groups they could begin to interact with others and open up about issues that were going on for them. The groups were full of tears and laughter over the years but the members offered a lot of support to each other.

I worked for MSS for 13 years, in two roles. My job title changed from Complementary Therapy Co-ordinator to Healthy Living Co-ordinator when funding was reorganised but I was allowed to continue delivering complementary therapies alongside providing cooking courses and education on healthy eating.

Two major work achievements happened at MSS while I was working for the organisation. In 2008 I was part of the team which won the Prince of Wales Integrated Health Care Award for work carried out in the local communities of Midlothian in conjunction with other health care professionals.

The second was the lead role on the 'A Good Start' programme, an early attachment programme that was available to every new parent in Midlothian. I developed and wrote the programme, trained the staff and volunteers and delivered sessions in the local community. Sure Start money is usually targeted to those in most need but this programme was funded by Scottish Government and NHS Lothian and thus could be offered to every new parent.

The programme was positively evaluated by the University of Stirling and their report, 'Parents' perspectives of a universal early attachment programme in Scotland', was published in *Health Promotion International*, Volume 32, Issue 6, 1 December 2017. It can be accessed at <https://academic.oup.com/heapro/articleabstract/32/6/1015/2951031>.

Midlothian is the fastest growing county in Scotland with thousands of new houses being built in the past eight years. Parents still say that they are friends with people they met in the MSS groups all those years ago. Many didn't know anyone as they

had moved out of Edinburgh to start a new life when they had a family and this isolation led to an increase in post-natal depression.

The MSS programme comprised baby massage, infant weaning, baby brain development and play, and was delivered by a team of trained volunteers, MSS staff including myself and, as a qualified instructor, I also delivered a paediatric first aid session. At its peak, the team worked with over 300 parents and their babies every year. The funding came to an end in 2016 as I left MSS and the programme was absorbed into the main funding. It continues at a lesser extent but sadly reaches fewer parents.

#### **What are your current special interests?**

I am now moving my business more into fertility, pregnancy and children. I will be able to carry out some of this online since, after 26 years of massage, I need to start looking at how to pivot the business and reduce the amount of massage I carry out until I retire. Although my clients seem to have different ideas and wish me to just carry on forever!

#### **What do you find especially rewarding in your work?**

The fact that people come in broken and, after a chat - an important part of the consultation - and a massage, they go out being able to move and feeling much better. Some do hate me the next day after I have worked their neck and shoulders and they are a little tender but then they do feel much better. They keep coming back each month to be 'fixed' so I must be doing something right! The fertility work is so rewarding too when a client becomes pregnant and has a baby. The support and guidance I can give is particularly important here, especially if there have been losses.

There is both joy and heartache in all parts of my work. However, most of my clients stay with me for a long time so I get to know them and their family dynamics very well.

#### **Do you have any favourite essential oils?**

I love Jasmine - the heady smell is just divine and helps to mellow me

# INTERVIEW

and the clients out. But you need to use it in moderation - too much can be sickly. I also love Frankincense for its muscle-relaxant and immune-boosting properties - we all need that all year round - and it is also very grounding.

## How do you look after your own spiritual and emotional needs?

At times I can be really bad at this - life gets in the way, the business gets busy. However, the lockdowns have given me time away from the bustle of a busy practice and the need to juggle clients, the paperwork, study, writing and going for a walk.

I now try to walk on days when the weather is nice and I have found

a new love of photography and invested in a new camera that takes great photos, especially of plants. I also have a reasonably large garden (equipped with a large greenhouse) that has been turned into an organic fruit and vegetable garden. It provides around 28 different fruits and vegetables and many different herbs to sustain me through the summer and some of the winter. And, of course, a good catch-up with friends never goes amiss!

## What inspires and sustains your interest in aromatherapy?

My clients and their needs and the fact that I am writing a book on

essential oils for pregnancy and with babies and children, and I want to get the information correct.

I am also part of the Fragrant Grapevine group that runs in Scotland, bringing fellow aromatherapists together to discuss essential oils and many other subjects.

Sometimes you just don't know where life will take you or what opportunities it will present to you and I like to go with the flow. I think my path is mapped out and it's probably good that I don't know where that path is going sometimes. But I do know I am doing a job I love and hope to be able to continue for many years to come.

# Client profiles

In the first of an occasional series of client profiles Amanda Deards explains why she believes every treatment tells an intriguing story

What strange and challenging times we have found ourselves in over the past year. We have all had to adapt our aromatherapy practice to keep our clients safe and much more interaction now takes place virtually. The upside of this new situation is that we can use the reduced contact time to focus on the treatment.

However, this new way of working can be particularly challenging with a new client. All I learned from Sarah's completed consultation form was that she had a 10-month-old son Abraham and was experiencing shoulder and neck pain. I find the virtual consult to be rather a blunt instrument but, happily, we were able to bond over the joy of her baby and she began to relax. To find out more about her shoulder/neck pain I asked how she was carrying her son and his paraphernalia, recommending a rucksack rather than a shoulder bag.

I also asked what activities made it worse and what time of day she experienced it most. Here, it started to get interesting because she said it was worse when she was lying awake

at night. When I asked if Abraham woke a lot during the night Sarah responded that he woke very rarely. Then, she began to talk about the anxious feelings she was experiencing - she could not stop worrying about literally everything. It made me realise how hard and lonely it must be for new mums at the moment.

Sarah has always been interested in alternative therapies and wanted to use them to manage her stress. We talked about the benefits of massage and how aromatherapy can reduce stress and anxiety and, most importantly, how natural and understandable her feelings were. I knew that massage would reduce her muscle tension and evoke her relaxation response, helping to put her mind and body back into balance. That, combined with the blend I had devised, would leave her feeling relaxed and rested.

That was the easy part but devising an effective treatment plan is about so much more. I wanted to give Sarah back some of her power and provide her with some tools of her own, so I suggested blogs and websites where she could find out about the benefits of aromatherapy.

When she asked about relaxation techniques I suggested Insight Timer.

This is a great app, offering over 70,000 free meditations, that I have used myself and had good feedback about from clients. The Beginner Kits are a great place to start and the wide choice of topics includes eg *Coping with anxiety*, *Managing stress* and *Improve your sleep*.

I first saw Sarah in December 2020 but her second treatment was sadly cancelled due to the lockdown. But we have exchanged emails as she has continued her journey using some of the tools I suggested, and I am pleased to report that using this broad approach to her treatment has helped her to move forward.

## Sarah's blend

**Lavender** (*Lavandula angustifolia*): relieves muscular aches and tension, calms the mind, sedative, especially when insomnia is due to mental stress and anxiety

**Roman chamomile** (*Anthemis nobilis*): anti-inflammatory action for muscle stress, antidepressant, calming, particularly beneficial for alleviating anxiety

**Bergamot**: (*Citrus bergamia*) recommended for anxiety and depression, sedative yet uplifting, helps regain self-confidence and refreshes the spirit