

Improving Psychological Support in Spinal Cord Stimulator Surgery: Insights and Actions from a Patient-Centred Focus Group

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BACKGROUND

This project reports on a focus group to explore patients' psychological perspectives on their preparation for a spinal cord stimulator (SCS) and their recovery from surgery. NICE (2008) recommends SCS for severe, persistent pain for a minority of patients, meeting specific criteria for pain conditions. Medical and psychological (mental and emotional) factors are all important and all potential patients undergo assessment by a doctor, a nurse specialist and a clinical psychologist to guide shared decision making, as part of the treatment pathway (British Pain Society, 2009). A review of the published evidence-base showed there is a need for understanding the psychological and environmental contributors in the outcomes of patients' SCS surgery, finding the current research is limited to evidence of the biological mechanisms (Nicholas, 2021). This focus group is a pilot for further projects in the service, working with experts by experience, to involve them in identifying and prioritising improvements in the healthcare service provision for patients in the future.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This focus group was a collaboration with patients with lived experience of spinal cord stimulator surgery and rehabilitation. The objective was to understand psychological aspects of their experience to inform what helps and what would help patients towards better recovery. Recognising the importance of patient feedback in improving surgical outcomes, the project focused on experiences of patients who had positive outcomes post-SCS surgery.

Aim: to enhance pre-surgical psychological support for spinal cord stimulator surgery patients.

METHODS

- A focus group was conducted by clinical psychologists in the pain service team at Addenbrooke's Hospital with support from the hospital's patient experience team. The meeting was held via video call.
- Three patients shared their experiences, particularly focusing on psychological preparedness and coping strategies.
- The discussion topics were defined by the multidisciplinary team. Participants were sent the questions to help prepare for the meeting. Open-ended questions were used throughout the meeting.
- The discussion included topics such as expectations, psychological support, coping strategies, and feedback on pre-surgical psychological assessment.

KEY FINDINGS

There were the following key findings:

- Meditation proved to be an effective coping strategy for patients.
- Ensuring access to high-quality psychological resources is important.
- Patient advocacy and peer support significantly enhance patient experiences.
- There is a need for support in pre-surgical medication reduction and a designated point of contact during recovery.

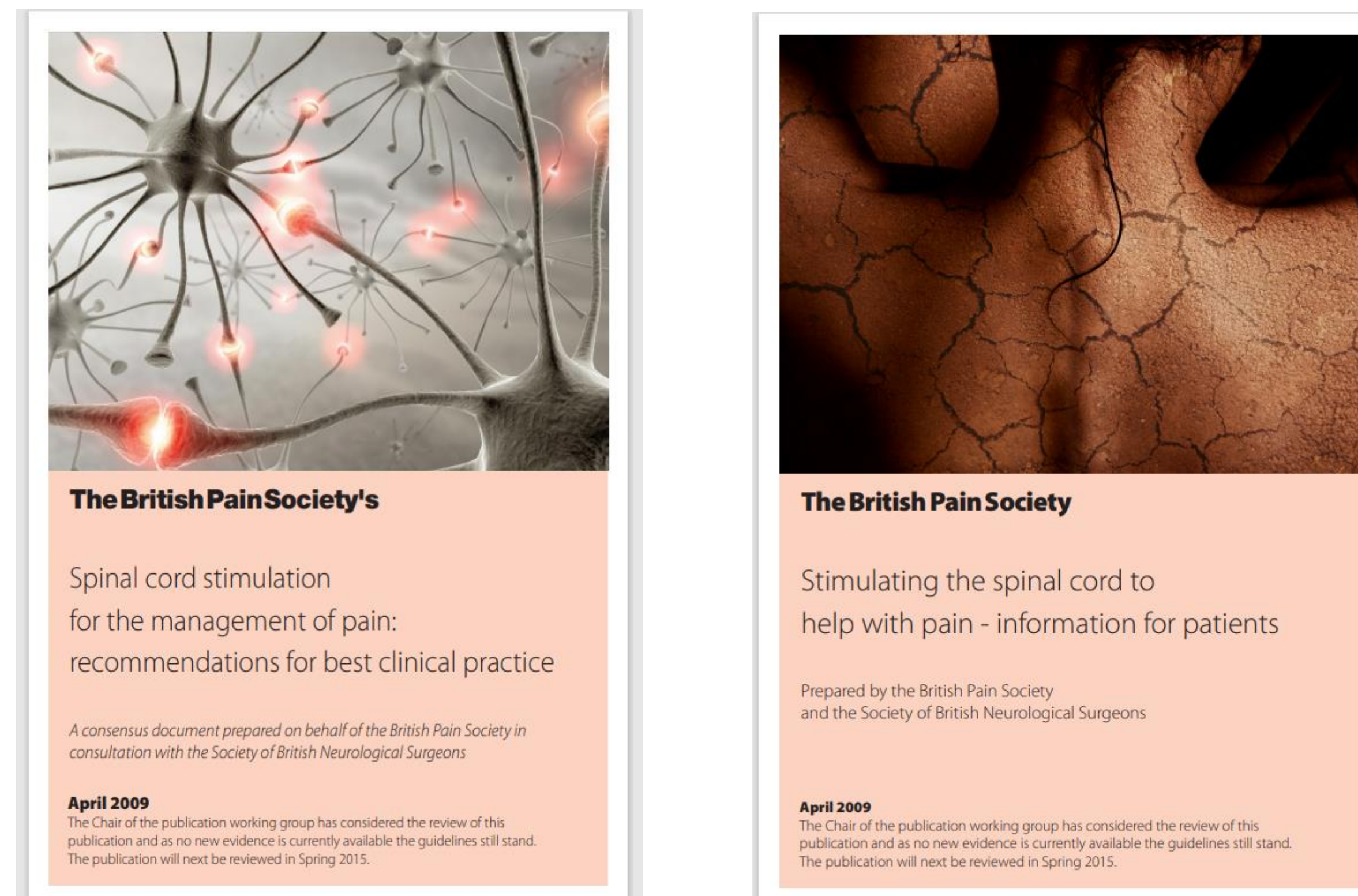


Figure 1: The British Pain Society (2009) guidelines for spinal cord stimulation.

What is SCS?

Spinal Cord Stimulation (SCS) was pioneered in the 1960s as a treatment option for neuropathic pain. This technique involves the surgical implantation of a device resembling a small pacemaker beneath the skin. Electrodes from this device are placed in the epidural space within the vertebral canal, near the spinal cord. These electrodes produce mild electrical currents intended to interrupt signals being sent to the brain that may contribute to a person's pain experience. This surgical intervention is described in published guidelines by NICE (2008) and the British Pain Society (2009).

ACTIONS TAKEN

The team initiated an action plan after the group. This was shared with the patient participants. The team did the following:

- Developed a mindfulness playlist to support patient coping mechanisms.
- Created an informative SCS webpage featuring evidence-based psychological resources.
- Enhanced communication strategies to better inform and support patients.
- Initiated plans to pilot an outpatient clinic offering integrated nursing and psychological support.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- The focus group provided vital insights into the psychological needs and preferences of patients undergoing SCS surgery.
- The recommendations from the group have led to actionable changes in patient care, emphasising the role of patient experiences in shaping effective psychological support.
- This project highlights the importance of patient feedback in enhancing quality of care and outcomes in day surgery settings.

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