

# **A Realist Evaluation exploring hydration in a population at risk of frailty: challenges and solutions to research during a pandemic**

**Mark Davis**

*University of South Wales*

**Carolyn Wallace**

*University of South Wales, Wales School of Social Prescribing Research, PRIME Centre Wales*

## **Background**

Frailty is increasingly recognised as a public health problem within an aging population - It is often characterised as an accumulation of clinical symptoms with progressive decline. We contend that dehydration is potentially the missing link driving the cycle of frailty. It contributes to malnutrition and cognitive decline and is a risk factor for other conditions. Frailty may also impact on fluid intake in cognitively intact older adults, indicating the cyclical nature of dehydration contributing to increasing frailty.

## **Aim of the study**

To conduct a Realist Evaluation exploring attitudes to hydration in a population at risk of frailty.

## **Methods**

A Realist Evaluation was undertaken, leading to the development of a Refined Programme Theory (RPT) articulating what hydration interventions work, for whom, to what degree, in what contexts, and how & why. The study was conducted during the Covid 19 pandemic, and the challenges of undertaking research during this time will be discussed, as well as practical steps that were taken to address them.

## **Results**

The RPT highlighted three different factors operating ranging from the individual patient level through to the wider organisational system in which healthcare services are delivered.

## **Conclusions and implications**

From the patient perspective, issues identified included the importance of maximising 'enablers' to hydration such as education around the need for hydration, physical accessibility of fluids, considering individual preferences, and providing meaningful hydration targets in language that is accessible. Findings having salience for the wider organisation include the importance of ongoing CPD, being available to provide patient education and conducting an ongoing holistic assessment of needs.