Thinking about writing for the National Elf Service?

The Mental Elf

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# Table of contents

1. **INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................................. 3  
   A. **WHO IS THIS DOCUMENT FOR?** ................................................................................. 3  
   B. **WHAT YOU WILL BRING** ............................................................................................ 3  
   C. **WHY START A NATIONAL ELF SERVICE?** ................................................................. 3  
   D. **EXISTING ELVES** ........................................................................................................... 5  
   E. **HOW DO THE BLOGS WORK?** .................................................................................. 5  
   F. **DESIGN AND BRANDING** ............................................................................................ 6  
   G. **FUTURE PLANS** ............................................................................................................... 6  

2. **CURRENT TEAM** ............................................................................................................... 6  
   A. **MINERVATION STAFF** .................................................................................................. 6  
   B. **CHIEF BLOGGERS** ........................................................................................................ 7  
   C. **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT** .......................................................................................... 7  

3. **SKILLS AND VALUES** ....................................................................................................... 7  
   A. **ETHOS** ......................................................................................................................... 7  
   B. **SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE** ............................................................................................... 8  
   C. **SEARCHING** ............................................................................................................... 8  
   D. **APPRaising** ................................................................................................................ 8  
   E. **WRIting/BLOGGING** .................................................................................................... 9  
   F. **BLOG FORMAT AND LENGTH** ................................................................................... 9  

4. **THE PRACTICALITIES** ........................................................................................................ 10  
   A. **WORDPRESS** .............................................................................................................. 10  
   B. **CREDIT** ...................................................................................................................... 10  
   C. **REPRODUCING BLOGS** ............................................................................................. 10  
   D. **REVIEW** .................................................................................................................... 10  
   E. **BASECAMP** ............................................................................................................... 10  
   F. **SOCIAL MEDIA** .......................................................................................................... 10  
   G. **EMAIL ACCOUNT** ..................................................................................................... 11  
   H. **ARTWORK** .................................................................................................................. 11  
   I. **EMAIL NEWSLETTER** .................................................................................................. 11  

5. **RELATIONSHIP WITH MINERVATION** ............................................................................ 11  
   A. **PARTNERSHIP** ............................................................................................................. 11  
   B. **RENUMERATION** ........................................................................................................ 12  

6. **ARE YOU INTERESTED?** ................................................................................................... 12  

**APPENDIX: LIST OF MENTAL HEALTH SOURCES - TBA** .................................................. 13  

   A. **WEBSITES** .................................................................................................................. 13  
   B. **JOURNALS** .................................................................................................................. 13  

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1. Introduction

a. Who is this document for?

This paper is for anyone who shares our commitment to delivering quality-filtered updates of emerging evidence that focus on the needs of health and social care professionals. And also anyone who likes elves!

We are looking for subject specialists, clinicians, researchers, students and information scientists to write blogs for the National Elf Service. Specifically the Mental Elf, a website aimed at helping health and social care professionals keep up to date with the latest reliable research, policy and guidance relating to mental health and wellbeing.

If you want to use your research and writing skills to make a real difference to patient care – read on.

b. What you will bring

There are a few essentials that you will need to write for the Mental Elf:

- **Mental health knowledge**: you don’t need to be a Professor, but you do need to know about mental health or a specific health condition within the specialty
- **Critical appraisal skills**: you need to be comfortable reading, appraising and summarising research papers
- **Writing skills**: you need to be able to write in clear, simple and engaging language


c. Why start a National Elf Service?

We’ve been working in evidence-based healthcare since the mid-1990s and have been involved in dozens of major web projects that aim to bring the best current knowledge to those who need it most.

It is our belief that health and social care professionals (doctors, nurses, specialists, social workers, trainees etc.) need to keep up to date with the latest research, policy and guidance in their specialty. This information is essential in order to make accurate decisions about health care.

There is good evidence that people are still not getting the information they need. The huge volume of high quality published research means that there is simply too much new information to keep track of\(^1\). Furthermore, a huge volume of irrelevant publications obscures the really good quality and clinically relevant material\(^2\).

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\(^1\) Heneghan C. How many randomized trials are published each year? 17th March 2010  
http://blogs.trusttheevidence.net/carl-heneghan/how-many-randomized-trials-are-published-each-year

doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124
However, studies show that if health professionals can get access to the right evidence at the right time, they make better decisions and fewer mistakes. Currently, users can subscribe to existing blogs, website feeds and bibliographic databases such as PubMed. Unfortunately, these only make the problem worse.

Although existing blogs provide frequent updates, they are often too specific and too driven by the agenda of the blogger to serve as a means of updating serious clinical knowledge.

Feeds from databases, journals and organisations exacerbate the problem because there are too many and they are too unfocused. Our studies show that even in the most important journals, over 80% of publications are irrelevant to clinical practice. The situation is even worse for databases: here, a typical saved search in the area of diabetes yields approximately two relevant items for every 100 hits retrieved.

Social media promises a great deal as a simple and accessible vehicle, but the quality of debate on sites like Twitter is frequently very poor and it takes a significant amount of time to build up the necessary connections to use Twitter to keep up to date.

Our solution is to marry the accessibility and immediacy of these resources with a strict focus on clinical relevance and quality, to create a range of expert health blogs that are user-friendly, engaging and fun!

This approach will save people time and bring them information they would be most unlikely to find by:

- Offering a range of specialty topics to choose from
- Encouraging users to make better use of the evidence because they are aware that they can get at it easily
- Facilitating intelligent debate around the evidence
- Providing a searchable archive

A variety of delivery methods will increase take up:

- Website
- Email newsletter
- Social media
- Bespoke evidence feeds (embedded alerts on the topics of your choice)
- Mobile apps (iPhone and Android services for daily push alerts)

This will help people by:

- Keeping the evidence in the foreground of their knowledge
- Ensuring they don’t miss any important new publications in their field
- Alerting them to important changes in practice

"Minervation was created to improve the quality of health information. They combine a genuine commitment to methodological rigour with a practical knowledge of how to make it relevant to people’s needs."
- Prof. Guy Goodwin, Head of Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford

http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124

1 Badenoch D, De Brun C. Where’s the evidence for evidence? Review of abstracts of studies of clinicians’ information seeking behaviour. The International Society for Evidence-Based Health Care Newsletter 4, July 2011.

https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B7TUcz2K9LnzYmE1MmVhMDktZWE3NS00M2QwLTk0YWItZTQ1OGVkZjkwNDY4/edit
d. Existing elves

Eight elf blogs have been created so far:

- Commissioning [www.thecommissioningelf.net](http://www.thecommissioningelf.net)
- Dental health: [www.thedentalelf.net](http://www.thedentalelf.net)
- Diabetes: [www.thediabeteself.net](http://www.thediabeteself.net)
- Learning disabilities: [www.weldblog.net](http://www.weldblog.net)
- Mental health: [www.thementalelf.net](http://www.thementalelf.net)
- Healthy lifestyle: [www.thelifestyleelf.net](http://www.thelifestyleelf.net)
- Musculoskeletal health: [www.themusculoskeletalelf.net](http://www.themusculoskeletalelf.net)
- Education [www.educationelf.net](http://www.educationelf.net)

And further blogs are on the way:

- Social care
- Stroke

The response to the existing sites has been extremely positive and we are therefore looking to expand into other areas and build up our teams of bloggers in existing topics.

Our model is to have one Chief Blogger (Editor) and a team of bloggers for each elf, so the workload can be shared.

e. How do the blogs work?

We have used the free open source Wordpress system to launch the existing sites. Each of them is a separate site at present, but these will be brought together into a single database during 2014.

Each elf topic publishes 1-5 blogs per week; highlighting new evidence identified from a range of trusted sources (filtered database feeds, journals, professional societies, public sector organisations, leading charities etc).

We carefully select evidence for inclusion and favour secondary publication material (e.g. evidence synopses, guidelines, systematic reviews) and high quality primary research (e.g. randomised controlled trials). However, we also recognise that the quality of research in some areas is not yet up to the gold standard, so we include other types of study when we consider them to represent the best available evidence in a specific field.

A complete list of the sources we scan for the Mental Elf can be found in the appendix.

“I have worked with Minervation on a number of national and international projects, in which they have brought immense expertise and professionalism into the important task of disseminating evidence-based information to patients, families, primary care, specialist care, prison staff and policy makers. They produce creative technical solutions to scientific and practical needs and are always a pleasure to work with.”
- Prof. Rachel Jenkins, Director of WHO Collaborating Centre and Head of Section of Mental Health Policy, Institute of Psychiatry
f. Design and branding

The aim of the National Elf Service brand is to present a friendly, approachable, upbeat and memorable service that stands out from the crowd in the congested health information market and on social media.

Each Elf should be recognisable and reproducible in a variety of online and paper-based formats, as well as being designed with character animation in mind.

Each Elf will sport an accessory that relates to the topic area, e.g. the Lifestyle Elf carries an apple.

g. Future plans

We will soon turn our individual Elf websites into an evidence network using Wordpress, which will feature a central database of all content; categorised and tagged to enable easy generation of bespoke feeds for different customers (e.g. a feed on depression and exercise).

We will also be adding website registration, personalisation and other features for paid subscribers, which will enable users to track which blogs they have read and what they have learnt from the evidence. Subscribers will soon get access to interactive online journal clubs and links to online continuing professional development.

We will use gamification techniques to encourage members to gain points and build their profile by participating in online activities, e.g. reading blogs, commenting on blogs, participating in an online members discussion, tweeting about blogs, joining an online journal club, writing blogs etc.

You can read more about our approach to digital innovation and our plans for the National Elf Service here: http://www.thementalelf.net/populations-and-settings/service-user-involvement/digital-innovation-works-best-when-users-are-involved-at-every-stage/

2. Current team

a. Minervation staff

André Tomlin
Managing Director, Minervation
Chief Blogger for The Mental Elf

Douglas Badenoch
Director, Minervation
Chief Blogger for The Diabetes Elf and The Lifestyle Elf
b. Chief bloggers

Caroline De Brún
PC De Brún Associates
The Commissioning Elf

Madeleine Grealy
University of Strathclyde
The Stroke Elf

Jennifer Hanratty
Queens University, Belfast
The Child Elf

Tracey Howe
Glasgow Caledonian University
The Musculoskeletal Elf

John Northfield
Independent Learning Disabilities Consultant
The Learning Disabilities Elf

Derek Richards
Director, Centre for Evidence-Based Dentistry
The Dental Elf

Leah Tomlin
Henleaze Junior School, Bristol
The Education Elf

c. Business development

Barry Holloway
Jon Miller
Digital Strategy & Online Marketing
Fennario Consulting Ltd

Jonathan Black
Richard Hardy
Board Members
Minervation Ltd

3. Skills and values

a. Ethos

We are applying the Minervation ethos to this project as we do to all digital innovation we embark upon:

- We always conduct ourselves with honesty and integrity
- We believe in inclusive and open-minded working
- We are passionate lifelong learners

Minervation Ltd is the company behind the National Elf Service
http://www.minervation.com
• We strive to take a fresh and original approach to new and existing work

Our aim is to bring together a group of like-minded people to work on this project and we started this process in 2011-12 by contacting our existing network of associates and colleagues, many of whom have given their time for free to help get new blogs off the ground.

We have built on this core team significantly since then by asking PhD Students, Post-docs, Researchers and other Health and Social Care Professionals to get involved in the Mental Elf, which now has a team of over 70 published bloggers from the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a number of other countries.

b. Subject knowledge

As an elf blogger, you will require a detailed knowledge of the subject area that will be tackled by the blog and a broad understanding of the variety of sources that will be searched for evidence to include.

We expect each blogger to specify a number of subject areas of interest, so that we can retrieve relevant research for you to blog about.

For example:
• A mental health specialist might state their interests as:
  o Depression
  o Anxiety
  o Dementia
  o Older people
  o Psychotherapies
  o Exercise
  o Mindfulness

c. Searching

Literature searching skills are not required for bloggers, as we will find appropriate evidence for you to write about. If you wish, you can also suggest studies for inclusion.

d. Appraising

Bloggers will need to assess the reliability and applicability of research papers to decide whether or not they should be included in the blog and how they should be summarised.

We recommend using the CASP appraisal checklists for this purpose: http://www.casp-uk.net

It is vital that bloggers feel confident and comfortable in criticising the research they are writing about. It is not sufficient to simply reproduce the conclusions written by the authors of the study. Your job is to highlight weaknesses in the study methodology and reporting and provide an evidence-based summary of the research with a commentary on the strengths and weaknesses, as well as some information about how the research findings could impact on practice.
e. Writing/blogging

The main task for each blogger is to write clear, readable and engaging blogs on a regular basis. The frequency of your blogs is something that we can agree in advance, but most contributors write a blog every 6-8 weeks.

Our aim is to maintain a team of at least 50 active contributors, who will be led by the Chief Blogger and supported by an Information Scientist.

Reading, appraising, interpreting and summarising research studies are therefore the main skills needed to be involved in this project.

The blogs should be written for a junior health or social care professional audience in clear, jargon-free English. Health and social care professionals are the primary audience for the website, so we expect clinical language and statistical information to be included in the blogs.

f. Blog format and length

Most blogs will use the same template structure:

- Background
  - A brief introduction to the subject area
  - Setting the scene
  - Presenting background statistics (incidence, prevalence)
  - Citing other related research
  - Introducing the new evidence that is the focus of the blog
- Methods
  - A brief summary of the methodology of the new evidence
- Results
  - A succinct presentation of the research results
  - Statistical results can be included
  - Complicated data can be tabulated if necessary
- Conclusions
  - A summary of the research conclusions
  - Can include a quote from the study if appropriate
- Strengths and limitations
  - This is where we present our critical appraisal of the evidence
  - This should include the methodological weaknesses of the study
  - It should not simply be a repetition of the limitations highlighted by the researchers themselves in their paper
- Summary
  - The final section is where we relate the evidence to practice:
    - Should this new evidence have an impact on practice?
    - What changes should be made as a result of these new findings?
    - What new research avenues does this evidence open up?
- Links
  - A complete bibliography of all of the evidence cited in the blog
  - Starting with the reference for the actual piece of new evidence we are highlighting

Blogs should generally not exceed 1,000 words (excluding the links and references presented at the end).
4. The practicalities

a. Wordpress

We’ll train you in using Wordpress so that you are self sufficient in writing, indexing and formatting your blogs. This will include:

- Writing and formatting blogs
- Categorising and tagging blogs
- Adding images
- Uploading documents and adding links
- Responding to comments and feedback

If using Wordpress is really not your thing – fear not! We can add your blog to the website for you. Simply send us your text in Word and we can turn it into an online post.

b. Credit

You will be identified by name, with a brief biography on the elf website and you will be credited for every blog you write.

c. Reproducing blogs

You are permitted to post blogs you write for the National Elf Service on other websites, for example your academic research department site. Our contributors from the University of Liverpool Addiction Group have done just this: http://livuniaddictiongroup.blogspot.co.uk/

If you do reproduce your blogs in this way, we ask that you clearly credit them and provide a link back to the National Elf Service blog.

d. Review

Your blogs will be submitted for publication and then reviewed by your Chief Blogger, who will ask you to make any necessary changes before the Chief Blogger schedules your blog for publication.

e. Basecamp

We use a simple online project management system to plan and manage the National Elf Service workload. You will register with this system so you can see papers that are assigned to you and communicate with other members of the team.

f. Social media

All blogs will be automatically sent out to a variety of social media channels using the Mailchimp Social plug-in for Wordpress. As a minimum, each blog will be expected to feature Twitter and Facebook accounts, but some may also have LinkedIn or Google+ groups or other social media accounts that are specific to the subject area.
Chief Bloggers will spend time cultivating a following on social media by establishing links with key influencers and promoting the National Elf Service brand to health and social care professionals.

Individual Bloggers will be encouraged to have a Twitter account so that they can participate in the discussions that take place following the publication of a blog.

g. Email account

A dedicated email address will be set up for each blog (e.g. feedback@thementalelf.net) and this will be used as the main contact point for all blog questions and related accounts. The email address will be forwarded to the Chief Blogger and also to a member of Minervation staff, so that all enquiries can be dealt with between them.

h. Artwork

Each Elf will be designed with a variety of different views, e.g. front-facing, in profile, pointing etc. These will be used on the blog and across the various media channels and publicity materials.

We will also make use of stock artwork libraries such as Shutterstock (www.shutterstock.com) to source appropriate images for inclusion on the blog. It is important that each blog has a number of pictures that are eye-catching, aesthetically pleasing and relevant to the subject of the piece. All bloggers will be given Shutterstock logins to source artwork for their blogs.

i. Email newsletter

A monthly email newsletter will be sent out from each blog. A sample newsletter can be seen at: http://us2.campaign-archive2.com/?u=89a101ff4b67d13029846ac93&id=eab0048623

Each newsletter will be generated from the blogs that have been published in the last month. A short introduction will be created for each newsletter and they will be sent out to subscribers using Mailchimp (www.mailchimp.com).

5. Relationship with Minervation

a. Partnership

We are seeking to establish strong long-term partnerships with individuals and organisations who share our vision for health information.

We have been involved in many national and international projects that have tried and sometimes failed to deliver accessible, usable and reliable health updates to the professionals who need them to inform their decision-making. We have learnt that above all else, these products need to be:
Based on the best available evidence
• Relevant to practice
• Simple to use
• Interesting and engaging
• Focused and not overwhelming

Building relationships around this vision with a group of talented and driven people will remain one of our main challenges for the coming years.

**b. Remuneration**

Chief Bloggers will be paid for the work they do. This role is likely to take about half a day per week, so a flat rate will be agreed for this time in advance.

Bloggers who regularly contribute to an Elf website will be rewarded with free membership of the National Elf Service when the subscription service is launched, which equates to a saving of £10 per month. Bloggers will also benefit from a range of training and professional development opportunities that come with working on a project of this nature.

**6. Are you interested?**

We would love to hear from you if you think you have what it takes to join the National Elf Service Mental Elf team as a Chief Blogger (Editor) or a contributing Blogger.

Please contact André to discuss next steps:

André Tomlin
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andre.tomlin@minervation.com
Tel: 07974 754352
Appendix: List of mental health sources - TBA

a. Websites

b. Journals