OPTIMISING PATHWAYS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE AFTER TRANSIENT ISCHAEMIC ATTACK AND MINOR STROKE

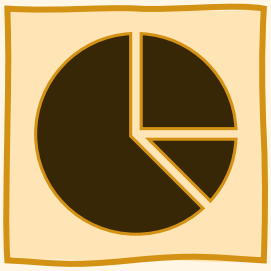
A Newsletter from the OPTIMISE Study Team

Winter 2025/26

Top stories in this newsletter

Myth-buster: You should feel relieved

Reflections from UKSF 2025



Participate in TIA research

Reflections and Goodbye from Sandra

OPTIMISE project update

Our survey for healthcare professionals is now closed

We have now closed our survey in which we were asking healthcare professionals about the screening and support available for mood and cognitive changes to people who experienced a TIA or a minor stroke. We are now analysing the data and hope to share our findings soon.

Myth-buster

MYTH: "You should feel relieved and grateful it wasn't worse"

FACT: After a TIA or minor stroke, people are often told they are "lucky" or that it could have been worse. While usually well meant, these messages can unintentionally minimise the emotional impact of the experience. Many people feel frightened, anxious, or unsettled afterwards, even if physical symptoms improve quickly.

Emotional and thinking changes are common after TIA or minor stroke, yet psychological support is often overlooked. Feeling distressed does not mean someone is ungrateful; it reflects the impact of a sudden and uncertain health event. Recognising emotional recovery as part of recovery is important.

If you have had a TIA or minor stroke:

- Your emotional reactions are valid, even if others minimise them
- If you notice ongoing changes in mood, confidence, sleep, or thinking, consider raising these with your GP to access appropriate support
- You can also seek support from organisations such as the Stroke Association and other stroke or TIA charities

Attending the UK Stroke Forum Conference 2025: Reflections

In this edition, our colleague Naomi shares her reflections after attending the UK Stroke Forum Conference in Aberdeen in November 2025.

Although my attendance at the UK Stroke Forum (UKSF) 2025 Conference in Aberdeen was unplanned, I was very grateful and excited for the opportunity to represent lived experience on behalf of the OPTIMISE study's Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) Group at one of the UK's largest stroke research and care conferences.

The journey itself to the event was long - around eight hours by three trains from Nottingham to Aberdeen - but thankfully smooth (on the way there at least...!).

I approached the conference with a mixture of anticipation and hope: anticipation at attending such a large and well-established event, and hope that I would see high-quality, impactful research that genuinely matters to stroke survivors, carers, and families.

UKSF 2025 marked the 20th anniversary of the UK Stroke Forum and brought together researchers, clinicians, health and social care professionals, people with lived experience, and carers from across the UK. The conference theme focused on collaboration, innovation, and improving outcomes across the stroke pathway — from prevention and acute care through to rehabilitation and long-term support.

Arriving at the venue was initially daunting - it was the biggest conference I've attended so far. The venue was large and busy, with a high number of delegates moving between sessions. However, any sense of overwhelm was quickly eased by the excellent organisation. Staff and volunteers were highly visible, approachable and very easily identifiable in bright pink t-shirts!

The conference was thoughtfully planned, with accessible toilet facilities, designated wellbeing spaces for rest and reflection, and a shuttle bus service between hotels and the venue. Although busy at peak times, this transport made attending the event far more manageable. A dedicated conference app was particularly useful, allowing delegates to view agendas, receive updates, and take notes or photographs linked to specific sessions — helping to capture and reflect on learning throughout the event.

One challenge I reflected on was how fellow PPI delegates were navigating the specialist language used in some presentations. Acronyms and research-specific terminology were common, which occasionally made it difficult to fully engage with findings. This highlighted the importance of making research outputs more accessible to non-professional audiences. If stroke research is to meaningfully involve survivors, carers, and the wider public, clarity and inclusivity in communication are essential.

Highlights from the Conference

There were many powerful and memorable moments during the conference. A particular highlight was the lived experience session titled "Creating SAFE Spaces: Why Lived Experience Must Be Part of the Solution," which showcased personal, moving, and inspiring accounts from stroke survivors. Seeing people with lived experience actively involved in delivering breakout sessions also reinforced the value of co-production and meaningful involvement.

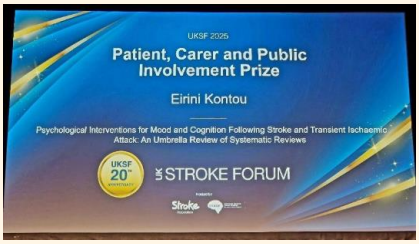
It was also a privilege to witness the OPTIMISE study being recognised through the Patient, Carer and Public Involvement Prize, and to watch Eirini present the findings from the umbrella review that formed stage one of the project. These moments demonstrated how high-quality research and lived experience can work together to shape better outcomes.

A more light-hearted but still educational highlight was the opportunity to explore a giant inflatable brain, learning how different injuries and conditions can affect brain function — a creative and fun way to communicate complex information!

Reflections and Learning

Overall, the conference was informative, enjoyable, and inspirational. However, one of the most significant lessons I took away was the ongoing challenge facing stroke research. Despite the fact that more people are experiencing strokes and at younger ages, research funding is increasingly limited. Recruiting participants — particularly from diverse backgrounds — remains difficult, yet without broad and inclusive involvement, research risks overlooking important perspectives.

A Call to Action



My experience at UKSF 2025 reinforced a clear message: stroke research matters, and meaningful patient and public involvement is essential to ensuring that research translates into improved care, support, and outcomes for survivors and their families.

Whether you are a stroke survivor, carer, professional, or researcher, there is a role for everyone in supporting and strengthening stroke research — through participation, advocacy, accessible communication, and genuine collaboration. By valuing lived experience alongside clinical and academic expertise, we can help ensure that future research truly reflects the needs of those most affected by stroke.

Written by Naomi Clifford

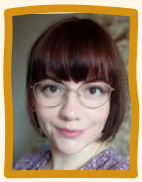
Research Participation Opportunity

Participants are invited to take part an online survey exploring how a Transient Ischaemic Attack (TIA) diagnosis should be delivered. The project is led by Ignas Kuliesius as part of the Trent Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, and is open to people who:

- **have either received a TIA diagnosis**
- **or are professionals involved in delivering or supporting this diagnosis.**

If you would like to take part or find out more, please click here or scan the QR code below. You can also email Ignas directly at 27164909@students.lincoln.ac.uk.

Reflections and Goodbye from Sandra



Sandra, our Research Support Officer, is finishing her role at the end of February 2026 and wanted to share a special message with everyone.

As my role as Research Support Officer on the project comes to an end, I wanted to take a moment to say goodbye and to share my reflections.

Working on this research has been a really meaningful experience for me. I have learned a great deal about TIA and stroke research, and about the importance of listening to lived experience and making research feel more human and accessible. It has been a privilege to be involved and to work alongside such thoughtful and committed people.

The newsletter has been a big part of my role, and something I genuinely enjoyed. I really valued the opportunity to share updates, reflect on progress, and highlight the work and voices of others. Thank you to everyone who took the time to read, respond, or contribute, that engagement really mattered to me. Although my role is coming to an end, I will be keeping an eye on how the project develops and wishing it every success.

Warm wishes,
Sandra

Research into TIA and minor stroke is still ongoing, and we will keep sharing updates as the work develops, including new opportunities to get involved and what we are learning along the way.

Thank you for reading!