

SPARX launched to aid youth mental health

April 29 2014

A self-help computer-based E-therapy programme called SPARX, developed to support young people experiencing mild to moderate depression or anxiety, was launched by Prime Minister John Key at the University of Auckland today.

SPARX is a clinically tested tool that can help young New Zealanders develop skills to deal with feeling down, depressed or stressed.

It was developed by a team of University of Auckland researchers and clinicians lead by Associate Professor in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Dr Sally Merry. The team worked with game developers Metia Interactive and Salt Interactive.

The Ministry of Health has supported the funding of this project through the Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project.

Dr Merry says the programme is designed as a game and uses Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to teach users five behaviours known to be especially important in protecting against depression – problem-solving, being active, positive cognition, social skills and relaxation.

SPARX talks to adolescents in a language and genre they understand and works equally well among ethnic groups and with male and female teenagers. Dr Merry says "we have good evidence from clinical trials that the programme is a very effective self-help tool for [young people](#) aged 12 to 19 who are depressed".

We are reaching young people through channels like Lifeline and Youthline which are very pleased to have this new offering as part of their services.

University of Auckland Vice-Chancellor Professor Stuart McCutcheon says SPARX is an example of university research delivering important practical applications. "SPARX shows how academic knowledge of serious health issues can be applied to create positive benefits in the community."

The University's commercialisation company, Auckland UniServices, has identified commercial opportunities for SPARX offshore. A licensing agreement has been signed with US partners Linked Wellness. The agreement provides for the company to make improvements and developments to the Sparx programme. Under the licence, Linked Wellness grants UniServices a royalty-free, perpetual right to use their improvements and developments within NZ and Australia.

UniServices CEO Dr Andy Shenk says "the agreement secures the rights for New Zealand's young people to have continued access to any improvements made to the programme on any platform."

At the SPARX launch, Mr Key said, "We know mental health is a big issue for teenagers with around one in five young people experiencing some form of problem during adolescence. It's important that they can get help when they need it. To do this effectively they need access to a range of forms of help and in different formats, including online.

"SPARX is designed to fill a treatment gap with young people who may not currently be seeking help. Users can access, register and start using SPARX independently and anonymously in their own time - making help available to more young people around New Zealand."

As an e-therapy SPARX has been widely tested with young people in New Zealand and has been found to be an effective treatment for mild to [moderate depression](#).

A study in the *British Medical Journal* in 2012 found use of SPARX resulted in a 'clinically significant' reduction in depression, anxiety and an improvement in quality of life.

SPARX is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which teaches skills to cope with negative thoughts and feelings, including behaviours important in protecting against depression – problem solving, being active, positive cognition, social skills, and relaxation.

It is also designed to fit alongside other forms of [mental health](#) treatment including face to face therapy, medication, family therapy and working on other issues in the young person's life, like dealing with bullying, and addressing alcohol or drug abuse.

Recording artist Stan Walker is supporting the launch by allowing his latest single 'Bully' to be used to get the SPARX message out to young people.

The Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project was launched in April 2012 and is investing \$62 million over four years in a range of initiatives to improve [youth mental health](#), delivered in schools, online, through communities and health services.

Provided by University of Auckland

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