



# Tune your lungs

Is singing really good for you?  
A pilot project in Folkestone is  
hoping to find out

**I**t's a grim Saturday morning in the sleepy seaside town of Folkestone in Kent. There's low mist and not many people are around on this cold January day. But despite the mood outside, the sound of *Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'* can be heard in the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health where a singing group has gathered for its weekly 90-minute session.

"I've been looking forward to it all week," says Dolly Mallinson, who returns for her second session. "I think singing is absolutely perfect therapy for anybody." And for this choral group, it is therapy.

No one has to audition here; attendees aren't required to sing in tune or even have any rhythm, they're in it to learn how to breathe correctly. This is a group called Singing for Breathing for people with lung conditions. Originally set up for people with COPD, it soon expanded; carers, friends and partners are even welcome.

## Health benefits

The group came about when the two professors who founded the centre and sung in choirs together wondered whether singing would benefit people with respiratory problems. They conducted an informal survey of the Canterbury Choral Society to gauge a response and it seemed to support their theory. There had already been some research done around the world, but the results, though positive, were anecdotal.

Dr Ian Morrison, Senior Researcher at the centre, launched Singing for Breathing after running successful choral groups for older people and people with mental



health issues. “The possibilities of breathing improvement are pretty self-evident with singing,” he says, “but when you start asking for funding, you’ve got to have a little more than ‘we think this is a good idea.’”

The Folkestone group is a pilot project. It may lead to a randomized controlled trial to officially test its effectiveness and garner the kind of results clinicians want to see.

Each week, the members gather to sing simple rounds, whole songs and, most importantly, learn how to use their lungs properly. “In a sense, it’s like a physical workout that some people would prefer to going on a treadmill,” says Dr Morrison. “It might even be a starter to that sort of activity.”

Margaret McCoombe, who has asthma, has been to three sessions and thinks it’s “wonderful”. “I find it’s really working my rib cage and it actually aches, not hurts,” she says. “I’m sure it’s doing it some good.”

### Mood enhancing

But the physical benefit is only one part of this initiative. “The social side is very important,” says Dr Morrison. “In fact, often when people aren’t so well they’ll still come to the group. You’d expect it to lift their spirits and it does.”

Dr Morrison is looking to set up more groups in east Kent; the long-term hope is that it will roll out across the country, but there’s a lot of hard evidence to gather first.

“You can say ‘come along and sing, it’s great’, but you can’t say ‘singing is good for

you’ because we don’t know that,” he says. “We think it is, or we wouldn’t be doing this.”

So far, so good. Nurse Sonia Page, who leads the sessions, says new people arrive almost every week. What started out as a two-strong group last September now has 16 members.

She is hearing a constant improvement in the sound quality along with positive feedback from participants.

“They’re telling us it’s helping them in very real terms: just feeling better, not having such a problem with sleep apnoea, which we’ve been surprised about, and feeling happier,” says Sonia. “I have absolute confidence in it helping, and I very much hope the end result is that people get this on prescription.”

“I very much hope that people get this on prescription”  
NURSE SONIA PAGE

### Show time

Today, the group do phrases and whole songs like *Sailing*, which they’re rehearsing for an upcoming performance. Everyone sings like they’re winning; the sound is good, and all the chit-chat afterwards even better.

Dolly Mallinson says: “I got pneumonia about three years ago and I haven’t been able to hold my breath as well as I might do, so I wanted to get my lungs working again.

“I feel the improvement. I went light-headed last week and she (Sonia) said that was normal as I was singing in the right place. I can’t wait till next Saturday.”

■ For more details, contact *Breathing Space* and we’ll put you in touch with Dr Morrison



**OPPOSITE:** Margaret McCoombe, who hopes the group continues.

**ABOVE, L-R:** The group rehearsing for its show; Sonia Page leading the chorus; Professor Stephen Clift, who inspired the project; Dr Ian Morrison talking to the group before joining in; Dolly Mallinson, who is feeling the benefit