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Steven Bettles (SB): Hello and welcome to the General Osteopathic Council Podcast. In each episode, we speak with experts and colleagues about topics affecting the osteopathic profession and our work as regulator for osteopaths, answering questions we get asked a lot by osteopaths, patients and members of the public. I'm Steven Bettles, head of Policy and Education at the General Osteopathic Council, and my guest today is fellow osteopath Claire Piper.

00:00:34:01 - 00:00:58:24

SB: Welcome, Claire.

Claire Piper (CP): Hello. Thank you for having me.

SB: You're very welcome. We're here today to discuss mentorship, something we see at the GOsC as really useful, not only to less experienced osteopaths who may be looking for support, but also for osteopaths who've been in the profession for a long time and may benefit from becoming a mentor themselves. Claire, firstly, can you just tell us about yourself and your work as an osteopath?

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CP: Yes. So I've actually been in practice for 33 years this year, which always makes me very surprised and makes me feel very old. I graduated from the ESO in Maidstone. I've got a private practice near Tunbridge Wells in Wadhurst. I'm there one and a half days a week with my associate as well. Then I'm a clinic tutor and a lecturer at BCNO

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CP: group three days of the week. So in London I lecture year three Paediatrics and I also tutor up in London at the paediatric clinic at B.Com. And then in Kent I tutor at the Children's Clinic in Maidstone. I'm also regional group lead for Kent and East Sussex Osteopaths or KESO for short and I've been doing that for 12 years.

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CP: So we've got over 250 members and we organise CPD events and networking opportunities for osteopaths in that area. And I've also been a mentor for five and a half years.

Steven Bettles: So that's a really broad experience, isn't it? Clinical work, educator, regional lead mentor and all of those things. Excellent. Thank you. Before we talk about mentorship, what do we mean by mentorship?

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SB: Give me your thoughts about what we actually mean.

CP: Yeah. I think it's important to talk about this first. So one of the things I would say, first of all, is that the mentoring agenda is always entirely driven by the mentee. I think that's a really important distinction to make. So if you were thinking of mentoring someone a new graduate, and you were thinking, well, they really need to improve their neurological testing

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CP: and I really need to go over orthopaedic testing with them and make sure it is spot on and I need to do this and I need to do that. That would be training, that wouldn't be mentoring. So in a mentoring relationship, all of the topics come from the mentee. It's all about what they want to talk about.

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CP: Also, mentees are responsible for what they get out of the mentoring relationship. That is not your responsibility as their mentor. So really what we do is mentors is we use our life lessons and our experiences to both empower and guide our mentees, and we try to give them our insight and the wisdom that we've gained so that we can allow them to make the choices that are right for them.

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CP: It's also important, I think, to say that mentors are always volunteers as well. There's never a financial gain from mentoring, and I think that that's important to keep money out of that relationship. Obviously, coaches and trainers, they could be volunteers, but usually they're getting paid. And usually with coaching and training there is some pre-set agenda set by the coach or trainer which you never get with mentoring.

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CP: And also coaches and trainers probably share some degree of responsibility for the learning because they are actually responsible for setting the learning goals. So a mentor really is primarily a guide and not a teacher, although they will always be elements of coaching and training that come into the mentoring relationship and I have a favourite book called the Mentoring Manual by

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CP: Julie Star and there's a very good quote in that book, which is that "mentors are the guardians of the flame of potential within another".

SB: Oh, I like that.

CP: And I actually really like that quote. I think it sums up the relationship very well.

SB: Yeah. So it's about sharing your experience and insights in order to help someone develop rather than setting goals.

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CP: Yeah, yeah. And make the choices that they need to make and kind of walk with them along that path of that first year in practice and, you know, hopefully make it a bit less rocky.

SB: And why did you decide to become a mentor? What was your sort of rationale and motivation for doing this?

CP: I mean, working in education, it was a bit of a natural progression for me, really.

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CP: I remember talking to final year students as they were coming out for graduation. And, you know, it struck me all the uncertainty that was about graduating and starting work and, you know, working maybe on their own and, you know, obviously working in a different place. Some of them were

moving abroad, and they just had so many questions that it just made me realise that, actually, hang on a minute, a bit of guidance here would actually go down very well.

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CP: And I also actually really enjoy having seen them as students, I really enjoy keeping in touch with new graduates. And sort of seeing how they're getting on from a personal perspective. So I thought that would be a good combination for me to start mentoring.

SB: And what's been your approach to developing this as a, as an activity because you're busy.

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CP: Yeah.

SB: I mean, you do a lot. You do a lot of things within the profession. So how did you develop this?

CP: All the way back. I can't actually remember when, but it was a good, good few years, maybe four or five, maybe even six years ago. I went to the Osteopathic Development Group Mentoring training day.

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CP: They had one at GOsC headquarters up in London. It was very well attended, and I found that a really good starting point for me. And it introduced me to things like the mentor code of practice and also the mentoring agreement, which I've actually used ever since. So that was the thing that kind of launched me, if you like.

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CP: Then I went back to college and I picked on a year four student, and I asked her if she wanted to be a mentor, and luckily she said yes. So she was my first mentee and I started seeing mentees initially at my home. So I did that for a couple of years. I would see them once a month for about an hour and a half, and I would see them through their first year of practice.

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CP: Then with my third mentee, I actually moved to online mentoring just because she was too far away. And I had she found that I was a bit nervous about that initially because I thought, well, you know, this is quite a sort of personal relationship. How is this going to work? But actually it was fine. It works. It works just as well.

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CP: And I've remained online ever since. I haven't gone back to in-person mentoring. I then decided after her, I decided, well, I could probably cope with a group of mentees, so I thought that it would be a benefit to the mentees themselves to have other peers around who were going through similar things, and that they could support each other, as well as getting support from me.

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CP: And also, of course, for me, it meant that I could support more people. So I moved to mentoring a group and I'm now on my second group. The membership tends to be rolling because some people don't want to stay for 12 months, which is fine. You know, due to different commitments or what

they're doing. So we have a rolling membership and we also have a WhatsApp group for all my current mentees so that we can communicate between sessions.

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CP: I still see people once a month, and I still keep it to an hour and a half, because that works for me. And, you know, it's important to set these boundaries for what is going to be sustainable for you as a mentor from the outset. Most of my mentees have come from, BCNO group, obviously, because I'm lucky in that way that I'm surrounded by potential new graduates.

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CP: But I've also got some of my mentees from the KESO regional group as well. My initial thoughts about groups were that I would take four students from the same cohort through a one-year journey, was my kind of original plan. Currently, I've got three people who I'm mentoring in a group, and I've got one person who I'm mentoring individually, which is fine.

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CP: You know, it's just circumstances and what is best for the individual and the three people that I've got, they actually come from different cohorts, which, although that's not what I planned. It's actually it's worked out okay because of different levels of experience and, you know, they have supported each other and played off each other.

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CP: Then in September, I decided that actually I would support entire cohorts from BCNO in much looser terms via Facebook groups so I set up two Facebook groups, one for the London cohort, one for the Kent cohort, And I asked fellow tutors to join so that there was a sort of link back to college tutors, and I've tried to encourage them to discuss cases or, practice challenges.

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CP: And I've also obviously in my position as KESO chair, I've been able to offer them either free or very low cost CPD opportunities as well. And also I started doing online peer support sessions. So a just a very loose kind of open session, just for an hour online, every few months where they can just come and drop in, have a chat, ask some questions.

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CP: it's not really mentoring, it's a very loose mentoring, but hopefully that still offers some benefits to people.

SB: So that's a broad brush. Then from that individual mentoring, group mentoring and a kind of enhanced alumni support scheme I guess really isn't it?

CP: Yeah.

SB: In many ways, what's gone well, do you think if you, you know, looking back now and how things have progressed over the last 2 or 3 years, you know, what would you say has been the successes of the project?

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CP: Well, I think the groups have worked well, and I do think that I mean, I have I have asked for feedback. And I do think that people have, benefited from listening to their peers within those groups and also listening to their peer opinion, as well as my own on, on different cases that they bring. I felt that they've collaborated well, and I think that they have gained, insight from listening to the topics that other people bring and maybe the struggles that other people are having and the discussions that we've had from those.

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CP: I enjoy individual sessions. I when you when you're mentoring someone individually, you can dive very deep into their own, sort of personal challenges. I quite enjoy that. So I've always enjoyed that work and continue to do so. And the cohort work I hope has just been able to kind of keep people together, offered a communication route.

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CP: They have, they have responded and they have they have come back with questions. People have attended the peer support sessions and also they've attended the CPD, which obviously as a new graduate you still need to do your CPD hours, but you're not necessarily earning that much money. So I think they've benefited from having that either free or very cheap.

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SB: And what are the challenges? Because, I mean, mentoring is something I guess that is, I know the Institute of Osteopathy have been very keen to promote and support, and you've been doing this, this kind of sterling work, but it's still something probably that isn't that widespread within the profession. And I guess that's because there are some challenges.

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SB: What would you...

CP: Yeah.

SB: What have you experienced?

CP: Yeah. I mean, the, the biggest things I think that come back to me when I ask people about being a mentor is always time. Yeah. So there is there is obviously a time commitment. But it doesn't have to be huge, you know, an hour and a half every month.

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CP: Most people could fit in. And if you've got issues with time, then you set boundaries at the beginning, you know, and you make it very clear about what you can and cannot do and what you can and cannot commit to it. You know, you don't have to be bombarded by your mentee every single day with trillions of questions.

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CP: You just set out what is right for you from the start. But the other thing that can happen, of course, is personality clashes. If when you choose someone to be a mentee, you might not know them that well, or you might only know them within a certain context. And as you start to get to know them better that's always potentially going to happen, that things might not work out, and also there can be clashes within, when you're doing groups that can be clashes within the groups, of

course, between the mentees themselves, you know, to get very sort of stropky about how someone responds or

SB: oh, really

CP: someone always is taking over and, you know, all those

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CP: kind of group dynamics.

SB: Yeah, yeah

CP: So in my mentoring agreement I have, that I get everybody to sign at the beginning, I have a no blame exit route for all of these kinds of scenarios. And I think that that's really important.

SB: For either party? For the mentor and the mentee?

CP: Yes, either party. Yes, I think it's really important that you are able to have that right from the start so that everybody knows that.

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CP: if this really isn't working out for me, I just I just need to go and then everybody's going to say, fine, you know, sorry it hasn't worked. But you know, good luck. And also I think it's really important to have opportunities for feedback at regular intervals. I usually ask about every six months for some feedback on how it's going for my mentees, and you need to be open to that as a mentor, you know, to make sure that you're doing the best job.

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CP: And also they need to be open to it as mentees as well. It can get really frustrating if you have a lack of engagement from a mentee, particularly if you're doing 1 to 1 work. For it to be successful, you really need a mentee that's really able to reflect and to really kind of be on it, you know, and, and, be on time, give you their full attention, having reflected on what they want to discuss.

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CP: And also someone who is, you know, willing to learn, willing to develop. And that doesn't always happen. And also, as a mentor, you might find that you are actually not very engaged with this particular mentee either. And you also need to be honest about that. And, you know, why is that happening? Maybe you've just got too much on maybe you need a break, maybe the relationship just isn't working.

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CP: So there needs to be some honesty there. And mentees can definitely develop issues with their mentor and the way that they communicate with them, or the way they're giving advice. So I always ask my mentees to have somebody else that they can talk to about me because I would never want them. To feel trapped within our mentoring relationship and thinking "Oh god, I really don't like what Claire's doing but I've got no one else that I can talk to about"

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CP: "Really I need to talk to my mento about what Claire is doing but Claire is my mentor". And so, you know, I don't want them to feel like that.

SB: So there are challenges then to this.

CP: Yes, there are.

SB: But there must be benefits.

CP: Yes, there are, there are definite benefits as well.

SB: So for both the mentee and the mentor. I've always found when I've been a mentor, I probably got as much from the process as well as the mentee, I think so anyway

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SB: that actually I found it hugely developmental for me as a mentor. Is that something you found as well?

CP: Oh yes, I have definitely. I've learned a huge amount from being a mentor. Yeah. But I think also as a mentor, when you're interacting with students and new graduates, their knowledge base is usually very, very fresh.

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CP: And the topics also that they bring for discussion can be very challenging. You know, they can raise something that you've not thought about for years. And actually that challenge to you, and that reflection that you do for yourself can obviously lead to CPD hours for yourself and also to developments in your own practice as well.

SB: Yeah.

CP: And I think that mentoring also improves your communication and your listening skills if you're going to commit to it.

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CP: And so to do it well and then by default really you, you have to become a good listener and an a better communicator. And it's just an opportunity really to give something back. I know I had good mentors, postgraduate actually my mentors more, and I was very grateful to them. And if you've had that kind of opportunity at college or postgraduate, then you just giving something back and helping the profession.

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CP: And actually there can be isolation within new graduates when they first go out. And maybe you'd be making a real difference to a new graduate and preventing them from feeling isolated and potentially unsupported and possibly leaving the profession, as opposed to remaining as a confident member of the profession.

SB: Yeah, I mean, I know that obviously there are osteopaths who work

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SB: in the NHS, not anywhere near as many who work in independent practice, but there are and allied health professions, generally, have experienced a higher than they would want rate of people leaving their professions within the first kind of five year of practice and have developed different ways of supporting that kind of transition process.

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SB: The NHS have a Preceptorship scheme, which is sort of a structured mentorship that I guess for exactly those reasons. And I guess, sort of extrapolating that to osteopathy, it seems to me that if we all assume that responsibility of developing the profession, and this could be some who works with you at your practise, but it may not be, and if you, I know, Institute of Osteopathy have a mentoring platform where you can engage with other who are keen to be a mentor and mentee and connect with someone who you may not have any, you know, knowledge or experience with that kind of providing that support more broadly is something that helps the profession.

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SB: It's an unusual profession, I guess, in that you can graduate from all that support and tutoring and, structures that you have as a student and then that that's all gone. And you have potentially for some people, there is nothing, even when they work in an established practice, sometimes there isn't that kind of direct contact with the principal or the owner of that, that, that practice.

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SB: And it can be quite isolating. We know this from a can work with, with new grads. So yeah, it seems to me that this is an investment in the future of the profession as much as much as anything, I guess.

CP: Yes. Yeah. And the feedback I've had from mentees has ranged from, you know, for the benefits has ranged from literally being a rock to cling to in those first six months, you know, not knowing what they were doing or where they were going, just to kind of providing useful guidance and advice, really.

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CP: And generally I just get the sense that my mentees just find it useful to have somebody to fall back on regarding cases or practice matters. And you can't always discuss those things with your principal.

SB: No.

CP: Especially if they involve your principal. Yeah. So it's sometimes nice to have somebody, you know, outside of your work that you can talk to know.

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SB: And this that's, that's very true. I was just thinking as well, in terms of how all this relates to the Osteopathic Practice Standards, as you know, working for the regulator. They're never far from my mind. And, and osteopaths, as we all know, and I'm one of them, I still have to do CPD, although I don't see patients these days

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SB: I'm still registered. And we need to demonstrate how well CPD equates to the four themes of the practice standards and the standard D9 "You must support colleagues and cooperate with them to enhance patient care." Actually, some of the guidance too, that talks about if you're responsible for an associate or an assistant, you should provide professional support and adequate resources for them so they're able to offer appropriate care for patients.

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SB: So I mean, that could encompass mentoring. It doesn't necessarily, but I'd suggest that the kind of work that you've been talking around does enhance patient care and does support colleagues and cooperate with them. And it's as you said, you know, the benefit of being a mentor is also having that as continuing professional development and relating that to that professionalism.

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SB: Same of the practice standards as well. So this seems like a win win.

CP: I wouldn't want I wouldn't want every principal though, to think that they had to mentor their associates and that was part of what they do.

SB: Yeah, I agree, I think there is a difference. I think because you've, as you've explained very well and sometimes it's useful to have that mentor outside the clinic or the organisation or whatever in which you are actually work just to get that objective perspective.

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CP: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, you can obviously support, a new associate in, in other ways other than, other than mentoring them. But yeah.

SB: Yeah.

CP: I mean, sometimes I wonder whether it's a good idea, to be honest, to mentor your associate. I just I just wonder sometimes, although I've done it, I, I, I'm not sure if it's the best thing.

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SB: Yeah.

CP: Just because you can never take your principle hat off. And I think that leaves, it leaves areas that are, sort of a no go.

SB: Yeah. I supposed have an investment in thinking as a, as a, you know, there's a, there's another interest in that.

CP: There is another interest. And I think for the mentee it would definitely there would definitely be areas that they felt they couldn't talk to you about.

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CP: And within that relationship it ideally should be completely open and able to talk about anything. So that's why

SB: we find this with the, I don't want to go on too much about the CPD scheme specifically, but we find this with the kind of peer discussion review at the end of that CPD cycle that some people are very happy and it seems the obvious choice for them.

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SB: You know, the principle of their practice will be their peer review. And others, you know, they definitely didn't want that. And yeah, we seek support or discussion with someone kind of completely outside of their day to day work as well. So, yeah. No, I do understand. I think you're

definitely right. Finally, what advice would you give to someone kind of interested in becoming a mentor or mentee?

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CP: Yeah. So if you're interested or thinking about becoming a mentor, I think you need to talk to other people who are already doing it. So people like me or people through the iO who've registered on their platform. The other thing I believe very strongly in is support for mentors. I think it's unreasonable to expect somebody to become a mentor and then just to leave them to it.

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CP: So I set up a mentor support group online and we meet every couple of months, and we have a WhatsApp group and got eight members at the moment and it's open to anybody who is either interested in mentoring or is a mentor. And it's also multi-disciplinary. We work with the Sports Therapy Association as well, and it's just a useful forum to talk about, you know, these challenges that come up.

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CP: You know, it's not all it's not always easy. And just to talk through with colleagues about what you're doing, maybe improve your practice with mentoring and just talk about mentoring really. There's, you know, there's not many opportunities to talk about mentoring. So I would always advise that somebody tries to find support for themselves. And the iO mentoring platform does have a lot of information on it.

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CP: It's got some very good videos that you can watch and resources, and then you do need to consider the time commitment. And can you stick with that is a, you know, is an important consideration. And then I would just say to someone, register on the iO platform so that people can see you see what your kind of areas of expertise are.

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CP: The other people you could go to is your local regional group as well, because they might have people in their group that are seeking a mentor. So yeah, I think I would say that to people wanting to become a mentor. And then for mentees, they can also go to the iO platform. They can find a mentor through that or through their regional group.

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CP: And also as a mentee, like I said, you also need to consider the commitment to your time, and you also need to consider your commitment to the process and to the reflection that it requires, and that it's going to be your responsibility to get the most out of this process and just have a real think about, you know, whether you're happy with that.

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CP: But if anybody is interested in becoming a mentor, then I'm very happy to talk to them. And I think my contact details are going to be with this podcast.

SB: That's right. Well, Clare, thank you so much for talking us through what you've been doing. I mean, it's really excellent work, I think, and I've seen you kind of develop this and implement it and it's, it's really impressive.

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SB: So thank you for that. And thank you for, for talking to us today. As Claire says, we will put the links to the various resources and the iO platform and other bits and pieces in the show notes so you can access them there, including Clare's contact details as well. So Clare, thanks again. It's been really interesting. Thank you.

CP: Thanks.

[Outro music plays]