A rehabilitation intervention to promote physical recovery following intensive care: a detailed description of construct development, rationale and content together with proposed taxonomy to capture processes in a randomised controlled trial

Pam Ramsay¹,²†, Lisa G Salisbury²,³*, Judith L Merriweather¹,², Guro Huby³, Janice E Rattray⁴, Alastair M Hull⁵, Stephen J Brett⁶, Simon J Mackenzie¹, Gordon D Murray⁷, John F Forbes⁷, and Timothy Simon Walsh²,⁸ on behalf of the RECOVER trial collaboration

Abstract

Background: Increasing numbers of patients are surviving critical illness, but survival may be associated with a constellation of physical and psychological sequelae that can cause ongoing disability and reduced health-related quality of life. Limited evidence currently exists to guide the optimum structure, timing, and content of rehabilitation programmes. There is a need to both develop and evaluate interventions to support and expedite recovery during the post-ICU discharge period. This paper describes the construct development for a complex rehabilitation intervention intended to promote physical recovery following critical illness. The intervention is currently being evaluated in a randomised trial (ISRCTN09412438; funder Chief Scientists Office, Scotland).

Methods: The intervention was developed using the Medical Research Council (MRC) framework for developing complex healthcare interventions. We ensured representation from a wide variety of stakeholders including content experts from multiple specialties, methodologists, and patient representation. The intervention construct was initially based on literature review, local observational and audit work, qualitative studies with ICU survivors, and brainstorming activities. Iterative refinement was aided by the publication of a National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline (No. 83), publicly available patient stories (Healthtalkonline), a stakeholder event in collaboration with the James Lind Alliance, and local piloting. Modelling and further work involved a feasibility trial and development of a novel generic rehabilitation assistant (GRA) role. Several rounds of external peer review during successive funding applications also contributed to development.

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Background

Survival following critical illness can be associated with a constellation of physical, psychosocial and cognitive impairments that result in disability and reduced health-related quality of life (HRQoL) [1-4]. Prevalent issues include weakness, fatigue, breathlessness, poor nutritional state, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic reactions, and reduced cognitive function [1,5-9]. Many patients are unable to perform instrumental activities of daily living (ADLs), are slow or fail to return to employment, and require significant functional and psychosocial support from family members [10-13]. The economic implications of post-critical illness disability are poorly defined, but are likely to be high in terms of direct and indirect healthcare costs [14-16]. Observational studies have identified and quantified many aspects of post-critical illness disability, but there are few evaluations of rehabilitation interventions designed to support or expedite recovery. Published clinical trials suggest possible improvement in physical recovery from strategies that promote early mobilisation and muscle activity during intensive care [17-19], and the supervised use of a self-help manual in the early post-ICU period improved recovery of physical HRQoL scores [20]. In contrast, other strategies focusing on longer-term physical recovery through physiotherapy and exercise programmes, and follow up clinics, have not improved clinical outcomes [21-23].

Rehabilitation is a complex healthcare intervention, usually involving multiple components delivered by a range of healthcare professionals. Complexity is increased when the patients involved are heterogeneous in terms of impairment types, severity, concurrent comorbidity and when the trajectories of recovery vary. In addition, different impairments may interact in variable ways, which may affect the response to therapeutic interventions [24-26].

Studying post-critical illness rehabilitation is therefore highly complex. Failure of an intervention could occur because the components were ineffective, because they were not delivered as intended, or because other factors limited their impact (for example, psychological morbidity or patient inability to participate due to fatigue). It is also possible that improvements in important outcomes are missed if the measures used lack sensitivity or are measured at the wrong time [27].

The development and evaluation of complex healthcare interventions requires an alternative approach to that used for simple interventions such as novel drugs. The Medical Research Council (MRC) has published guidance on development, evaluation, and reporting, which recommends addressing the following questions when developing an intervention [27]:

- Are you clear about what you are trying to do, what outcome you are aiming for, and how you will bring about change?
- Does your intervention have a coherent theoretical basis which has been used to develop the intervention?
- Can you describe the intervention fully, so that it can be implemented properly for the purposes of your evaluation, and replicated by others?
- Does the existing evidence suggest that it is likely to be effective or cost effective?
- Can it be implemented in a research setting, and is it likely to be widely implementable if the results are favourable?

The extended CONSORT guidance for reporting non-pharmacologic randomised trials emphasises the need to fully describe interventions [28]. Specifically, rehabilitation

Results: The final construct for the complex intervention involved a dedicated GRA trained to pre-defined competencies across multiple rehabilitation domains (physiotherapy, dietetics, occupational therapy, and speech/language therapy), with specific training in post-critical illness issues. The intervention was from ICU discharge to 3 months post-discharge, including inpatient and post-hospital discharge elements. Clear strategies to provide information to patients/families were included. A detailed taxonomy was developed to define and describe the processes undertaken, and capture them during the trial. The detailed process measure description, together with a range of patient, health service, and economic outcomes were successfully mapped on to the modified CONSORT recommendations for reporting non-pharmacologic trial interventions.

Conclusions: The MRC complex intervention framework was an effective guide to developing a novel post-ICU rehabilitation intervention. Combining a clearly defined new healthcare role with a detailed taxonomy of process and activity enabled the intervention to be clearly described for the purpose of trial delivery and reporting. These data will be useful when interpreting the results of the randomised trial, will increase internal and external trial validity, and help others implement the intervention if the intervention proves clinically and cost effective.

Keywords: Critical care, Rehabilitation, Complex intervention
trials should report the content of therapy sessions, how they were delivered, the information exchanged with participants, and the instruments used to provide information. Data describing the number, timing, and duration of each therapy session, its main component(s), and the overall duration of the intervention should be described, and it is recommended that the ways in which the intervention was tailored to individual patient needs is reported. Wells and colleagues [29] emphasised the importance of describing and understanding context in complex intervention trials to maximise understanding of the external relevance of findings outwith trial settings.

We developed a complex healthcare intervention to promote physical recovery following critical illness, which is currently being evaluated in a randomised trial: the RECOVER study (ISRCTN09412438). The trial protocol has been published [30]. The aim of this paper is to describe how the RECOVER intervention was developed and present a taxonomy for describing the treatments delivered. The information included is intended to enable other clinicians, researchers, and healthcare providers to fully understand the rationale for the intervention. We anticipate this will improve the external validity of the trial findings by providing a level of information that will help interpret the findings. The detail provided in this paper will aid reproduction of the intervention in other settings.

**Methods**

The intervention evolved between 2005 and 2010. The multidisciplinary research group included an academic critical care physician (TSW), two academic ICU nurses (PR, JER), an academic physiotherapist (LGS), a clinically and research active dietitian (JLM), a psychiatrist with an interest in post-critical care psychological morbidity (AMH) and a critical care physician in a senior National Health Service (NHS) management role (SJM). Methodologists included a social anthropologist with expertise in health service change (GH), a trialist/statisticians (GDM, Steff Lewis (MRC methodology hub; Edinburgh University)) and a health economist (John Forbes (Centre for Population Health Sciences, Edinburgh University)).

The optimum methodology for developing rehabilitation trials for patients experiencing critical illness has not been determined, and we did not define this a priori at the start of the research programme. The process used was iterative and a range of factors influenced the final construct, including responses to reviewers during sequential revisions of grant applications. Individual and collective brainstorming strongly influenced the final intervention, which was also influenced by emerging local data from collaborators undertaking post-graduate degrees and post-doctoral work during this period [31-33]. These individuals adopted lead roles in defining specific elements of the intervention, but group activities ensured all ideas were heard.

Inputs from patients and carers were collated from several sources: first, a local qualitative study with survivors of prolonged mechanical ventilation [31]; second, discussions with former patients during a “pilot” post-ICU service (see below); third, a range of interviews publicly available at Healthtalkonline (http://healthtalkonline.org); fourth, a James Lind Alliance event organised by the Edinburgh Critical Care Research Group at which the perceived needs of patients during the post-ICU period was discussed [34]; and fifth, a patient representative on the trial steering group, who had experienced a prolonged recovery following severe acute respiratory distress syndrome.

During the iterative development process it became clear that defining the content of the intervention, its timing in relation to the recovery process, and the method of delivering it were of central importance to both trial design and subsequent interpretation of findings. These are each considered separately. Following agreement of the final construct, a taxonomy was developed to fully describe the intervention components, and facilitate adequate reporting during the trial.

**Results**

**Defining components of the intervention**

The range of research, feasibility, and piloting activities that contributed to defining the intervention content are summarised below.

**Literature review**

We undertook a detailed literature review, which indicated consistent reports of physical disability after ICU discharge, which was most marked in the initial months and tended to recover with variable trajectories over 3 to 6 months [1,35,36]. Many patients did not regain pre-illness function. It was also relevant that many patients report pre-existing comorbidity and physical impairment [37-40]. Poor appetite and altered taste were widely reported, which could contribute to slow nutritional recovery and/or failure to regain pre-illness weight [5]. The published literature suggested these features are most prominent during the initial weeks and months following ICU discharge, corresponding to the period in hospital and early after discharge to community/primary care. However, the duration of symptoms and disability clearly vary widely between individuals in type, severity and duration, and no validated method for predicting individual recovery trajectories was found.

In addition to physical disability, a high prevalence of psychological morbidity following critical illness was reported [6,7,9,36,41-43]. This included anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptomatology with widely ranging prevalence depending on case mix, time of measurement, and measurement tool [43]. Emerging evidence
over the development period suggested symptomatology was increased by pre-illness factors (for example, previous psychiatric history) [6,41], a mixture of non-modifiable and potentially modifiable ICU related factors (greater illness severity, delusional memories, delirium, oversedation) [41,44], and potentially modifiable post-ICU factors (provision of information, patient diaries) [45,46]. In addition to psychological morbidity, the literature indicated significant cognitive decline in many patients following critical illness, including impaired memory, executive function [9,47,48] and limitation in instrumental ADLs [38,47]. There were few published trials of therapeutic interventions over the course of intervention development. Many of these were restricted to the time in ICU. Several studies strongly influenced the development of our intervention (Table 1).

During intervention development, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published a short guideline for rehabilitation after critical illness [36]. This included a formal systematic review and recommendations based substantially on the multidisciplinary expertise of the guideline development group (GDG). The systematic review did not identify important new evidence compared to our literature review. The GDG recommended sequential assessments at key points in the patient pathway, with provision of physical and psychological rehabilitation when appropriate. The GDG acknowledged, however, that the most appropriate assessment tools and rehabilitation interventions were unknown. A summary of the key recommendations is shown in Table 2. To ensure our intervention was consistent with the recommendations and expertise of the GDG we invited the Chair (SJ B) to act as independent Chair to the RECOVER Trial Steering Committee, offering advice and additional expert review.

**Work with patients and families**

Qualitative interviews with former patients [31] indicated a range of important issues during the weeks following ICU discharge that were important to patients. Thematic analysis resulted in key issues to incorporate in the trial intervention (Table 3). Some were generic (for example, coordination and continuity of care, preparation for discharge home, providing information) while others related to specific issues (for example, physiotherapy provision, individualised therapy, discussion of memories). Many of these were supported by existing literature, and were also reported by patients and families during discussions at the James Lind Alliance event [34].

**Audit of existing service provision**

To provide additional local data, we prospectively audited current provision of rehabilitation between ICU and hospital discharge in one institution (Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, Scotland), with a focus on the level of input in terms of physiotherapy, dietetic, and other allied health services [32]. We noted that physiotherapy sessions were of low frequency and intensity and limited range. Dietetic management was limited to review of nutritional status and requirements, and advice about artificial nutrition or provision of supplements. Follow-up to explore whether nutrition was improved (for example, through food diaries, monitoring intake of supplements, assisting with eating, or individualisation of food provision) was rarely achieved. Systematic use of referral triggers to rehabilitation specialists such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy was absent. Those referrals which did occur did so in an *ad hoc* manner. Many patients were not assessed or reviewed by these specialists until close to hospital discharge. Important general observations were that patients discharged from critical care became widely dispersed across the general wards, usually according to their “parent” specialist team. This resulted in a dilution of knowledge and expertise among medical, nursing and allied health professional staff of their history and problems, which affected continuity of care. A striking observation was that large numbers of different healthcare professionals reviewed patients at different times often in an

| Trial                          | Summary                                                                 |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jones et al. 2003 [20]         | Ward-based: Self-help manual over 6 weeks, which improved physical function (measured using the SF-36 PCS) at 2 and 6 months following ICU discharge. Patients were recruited to the study within 1 week of discharge from intensive care. The intervention group received the self-help manual in addition to the routine ICU follow-up that all patients received. |
| Schweickert et al. 2009 [49]  | Intensive Care: Early exercise and mobilisation (physical and occupational therapy) during sedation breaks in intensive care. Patients were recruited if less than 72 hours of mechanical ventilation. Return to independent functional status at hospital discharge was significantly higher in the intervention group. They also had a shorter duration of delirium and more ventilator-free days compared to the standard care group. The intervention was delivered primarily in the ICU. |
| Cuthbertson et al. 2009 (PRACTICAL) [21] | Discharge Home: Nurse-led follow-up clinic at 3 and 9 months post-hospital discharge, in combination with a manual based, self-directed, physical rehabilitation programme introduced in hospital. At 12 months, there were no statistically significant differences in HRQoL or any secondary measures between groups. |

HRQoL, health-related quality of life; SF-36 PCS, SF-36 Physical Component Score
uncoordinated manner [33]. Few professionals had time to gain an understanding of complex histories and clinical course of patients. In addition, patients effectively “competed” with less severely unwell patients (for example, elective surgery or short-term medical admissions) for scarce rehabilitation resource. There was an impression that shortages of ward beds potentially resulted in prioritisation of less sick patients for rehabilitative provision because they were more likely to be discharged quickly. Post-ICU patients were usually discharged directly home, were rarely offered formal rehabilitation, and when this occurred there was usually a long delay in transfer. Hospital discharge planning was poorly coordinated and the information provided to general practitioners and other community staff was inconsistent and often incomplete.

**Pilot provision of post-ICU rehabilitation multidisciplinary ward round**

Two ICU consultants (including TSW) piloted a multidisciplinary weekly round of patients who spent >4 days in the ICU with members of the research team representing a nursing (PR), dietetic (JLM), and physiotherapy (LGS) perspective. A log was kept to capture key contributions that might be incorporated in the trial intervention. Several additional issues emerged from this work: first, patients and families had limited access to information about the ICU stay or likely recovery trajectory from medical, nursing or other staff; second, review of medical notes often revealed medication changes that were overlooked (for example, stopping stress ulcer prophylaxis, antibiotic review, re-starting usual medications); third, patients were frequently socially isolated (often placed in a side room) because of real or perceived infection risk (for example, MRSA colonisation) or debility; fourth, patients frequently had prominent traumatic delusional memories that were not being aired, they did not understand, and were often only revealed when questioned sensitively; fifth, the information provided to community teams was often medicalised and not relevant to the rehabilitation needs of the patient; sixth, the demands and workload of the multidisciplinary team on general wards, especially nursing, dietetic, physiotherapy, and medical staff, meant they rarely met together to coordinate case management of complex post-ICU patients; finally, decisions about hospital discharge were often determined by medical staff from the ‘parent specialty’ team without multidisciplinary planning or negotiation with individual patients and/or their family members.

| General recommendations | Pathway-specific recommendations |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| **Rehabilitation should be undertaken by individuals with relevant skills and knowledge** | **Assess risk of post-ICU disability** |
| Communication between teams and professionals over the rehabilitation pathway should occur | **Commence goal-oriented rehabilitation early** |
| | **Involve families and carers** |
| | **Provide illness-related information to patient and family** |
| | **Optimise provision of nutrition** |
| | **Screen patient for physical and psychological issues** |
| | **Plan individualised rehabilitation programme with defined goals** |
| | **Provide information to patients and families about rehabilitation pathway, likely morbidity, ICU stay, and transition to general ward environment** |
| | **Repeat screening for physical and psychological issues** |
| | **Offer individualised rehabilitation programme with defined goals, provided by a multidisciplinary team** |
| | **Regularly update rehabilitation programme and goals, making specialist referral where appropriate** |
| | **Offer structured self-directed and supported rehabilitation manual for at least 6 weeks to appropriate patients** |
| | **Perform a functional assessment including physical and psychological elements, evaluating the impact on patient activities of daily living and participation** |
| | **Ensure support for outstanding issues are arranged, including ongoing rehabilitation by community services** |
| | **Provide patient and family with relevant information, including information about their ICU stay** |
| | **Review patient as outpatient and perform functional assessment** |
| | **Refer for ongoing rehabilitation and/or specialist support according to individual need** |

Adapted from [36]
Feasibility trial to deliver enhanced physical and dietetic therapy with a generic rehabilitation assistant

A single-centre feasibility trial was undertaken to explore whether a GRA could work effectively under the supervision of multiple existing specialist teams to improve access to rehabilitation, coordinate case management, and deliver therapy. The results of this trial have been published, together with an individual case study [32,33]. This study established a model for a GRA with multiple skills working across several teams (primarily physiotherapy) under senior supervision. It also enabled the educational requirements of the role to be identified and developed, competencies defined, and the development of trigger tools for referral to senior specialists.

### Table 3 Key themes from interviews with survivors of critical illness

| Theme                                                                 | Illustrative quotes                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Coming to terms with memories and experience of ICU                  | “I was convinced that Jack (the Ripper) was going to...”                                                                                               |
| • Waking up and not knowing what has happened                         | “…it all just suddenly clicked into place...”                                                                                                       |
| Needing knowledge and information                                      | “I said, ‘Tell me once I’m better. Don’t tell me just now, because every day is a battle’. I really didn’t want to hear...”                        |
| • Waking up and not knowing what has happened                         | “Even in my fuzzed head, I was aware on a number of occasions that whoever was momentarily in charge of me had scant knowledge of who I was and how I got there”. |
| • Reliance on family for informational needs and the need for flexibility in terms of timing | “I don’t know if it’s something that happens if you’ve only been in ICU a few days...”                                                              |
| • Poor continuity of care/ inability of ward-based staff to provide information on the critical illness event | “I was told I’d get very intensive physio... and then I got none for 5 days straight. It was only when I made a fuss that I got it. And then I got...” |
| Dealing with physical disability                                       | “I was determined I was gonna get mobile as quick as possible. I had to fight with them at first, but then they let me do things at my own pace.”          |
| • Making sense of functional impairment and dependence                | “I had to fight with them at first, but then they let me do things at my own pace. I said to them ‘I will walk and I will do this, but you’ve got to let me do it...’” |
| • Frustration with brevity, frequency, delivery of physical therapy in relation to perceived needs | “When I first got home, I got the shock of my life...”                                                                                                  |
| • Regaining functional independence as priority                       | “I had to get some assistance having a seated shower. I couldn’t stand because I was so weak... and they maybe showed a bit of impatience with me there”    |
| • Feeling outside the rehabilitative process                          | “I had to get some assistance having a seated shower. I couldn’t stand because I was so weak... and they maybe showed a bit of impatience with me there”    |
| General ward staff awareness                                          | “When I first got home, I got the shock of my life...”                                                                                                  |
| • Perceived insensitivity of staff to limitations and basic care needs | “I was determined I was gonna get mobile as quick as possible. I had to fight with them at first, but then they let me do things at my own pace.”          |
| • Lack of understanding of their limitations and its cause ICU-acquired weakness | “I had to fight with them at first, but then they let me do things at my own pace. I said to them ‘I will walk and I will do this, but you’ve got to let me do it...’” |
| Hospital discharge planning                                           | “I had to get some assistance having a seated shower. I couldn’t stand because I was so weak... and they maybe showed a bit of impatience with me there”    |
| • Pressure on beds; patients often discharged with limited functional ability | “I’m still waiting (for a bath seat), and I don’t know whether to ring back or persevere. Maybe somebody’s need is greater than mine. But initially, it would’ve been a big help”. |
| • Poor communication between acute and community teams; lack of timely provision of home aids | “I was determined I was gonna get mobile as quick as possible. I had to fight with them at first, but then they let me do things at my own pace.”          |
| Early life at home                                                    | “I was glad to be home but very, very tired and very weak. I had to rely on someone to help me get up, dress me, that sort of thing”.                  |
| • Not being adequately prepared for dependence on others              | “I could’ve done more... to help myself... because my brother asked for a sheet of exercises for me to do when I got out. I realise now... I could’ve been doing a lot of that... and I think I could’ve progressed quicker”. |
| • Lack of guidance in terms of self-management of the recovery process | “…one afternoon, I walked right over there (gestures out of the window). But I was so knackered later that day that I daren’t go out the next day at all. At first I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll perhaps do this every day’, but I’ve not been out since (laughs)” |
The study specifically highlighted the need for pacing and individualised patient-centred goal setting techniques for both dietetic and physiotherapy rehabilitation. The high levels of fatigue immediately following intensive care discharge and wide variation in ability between patients highlighted the need for individually tailored rehabilitation programmes.

**Selection of key intervention elements**

Based on the above, we decided to focus our intervention primarily on physical rehabilitation, because physical impairments were highly prevalent, appeared to strongly influence length of acute hospital stay, and profoundly affected the lives/ADLs and HRQoL of patients. The intervention components focussed primarily on better coordination and increased delivery of physiotherapy and nutritional rehabilitation, with a clear strategy to engage occupational therapy and speech and language therapy when required. An emphasis was placed on individualised rehabilitation to suit patient ability, with the intention of including patient-centred goal setting to the rehabilitation process. The only post-ICU intervention with evidence of effectiveness from clinical trials was the use of a self-help manual [20], so we chose to provide these to all participants, irrespective of group allocation in the trial. Our intention was for the standard care group to receive these in the context of existing rehabilitation services, whereas the intervention group would receive them as part of their enhanced rehabilitation.

Physical rehabilitation was supplemented by information giving in the form of a consultant visit, lay summary, and the offer of an ICU visit. These interventions focussed on explanation of events during ICU admission, current symptomatology (including delusional memories), and what to expect during recovery.

We recognised the importance of psychological morbidity to recovery. From the content experts in our group (AMH and JER), it was clear that the progression and evolution of psychological symptomatology is difficult to predict, and that evidence for the optimum intervention, its timing, and efficacy are very uncertain during the early recovery period. We therefore chose to provide enhanced information provision as part of the intervention, educate staff in the principles of post-ICU psychological problems, but not include a formal psychological intervention.

**Timing of the intervention**

We decided to focus our intervention from the time of ICU discharge for up to 3 months, when the primary outcome of physical function was measured. Evidence for benefit from early physical mobilisation during mechanical ventilation emerged during the intervention development [49-51], and was being progressively implemented as a standard of care in the participating ICUs. In addition, the NICE guidance made research recommendations to evaluate the impact of coordinated rehabilitation, and the impact of specific therapeutic components, at key stages of recovery [36]. We decided to exclude the ICU stay, because this treatment would be difficult to control and the focus of our intervention was multidisciplinary rehabilitation during the later stages of recovery. In the UK, where the trial was planned, most patients are discharged to general ward care within a short time of discontinuing mechanical ventilation and other organ support (typically 1 to 2 days). On a practical level, recruiting patients earlier during mechanical ventilation introduced the competing risk of death as a potential major problem with trial design, because hospital mortality for patients requiring >48 hours of mechanical ventilation is typically 20 to 25% [52]. This was potentially problematic where the proposed primary and important secondary outcomes were measures of disability and HRQoL. Pragmatically, we thought the complexity of delivering and describing a multidisciplinary complex intervention during and after ICU, two environments with very different implementation challenges, would increase the risk of unsuccessful project completion. The entry point was therefore the time a patient was deemed fit for discharge from the ICU by the responsible physician.

We chose to end the period of intervention at 3 months post-randomisation irrespective of patient status or location. Our rationale was that the steepest trajectory of physical recovery occurs during this period, but the literature clearly indicates persisting disability among many patients at this time point [1,3,4,53]. We expected this intervention period to include the transition to general ward care for all patients, the full period of general ward care for the majority of patients, the transition to post-acute hospital destination for the majority of patients, and a period of living at home or other post-discharge placement for most patients (Figure 1). As such, our intervention period included the key areas of need identified during development; it was clearly defined for the purpose of trial design and reporting. Previous studies have used hospital discharge as the outcome assessment point, which is influenced by factors other than disability, and is potentially subject to researcher bias in non-blinded trials [49,51]. We chose not to include clinical review at 2 to 3 months as part of the intervention. This decision was influenced by the negative results of a high-quality trial of ICU follow-up clinics [21], the limitations of what could be achieved with available resources, and the pre-trial qualitative and audit data indicating the high unmet needs during the first 3 months following ICU discharge.

**Method for delivering the intervention**

We decided to employ dedicated GRAs as the key structure underpinning our intervention, extending the role
from our feasibility trial [32]. We used the feasibility trial and audit data to anticipate the number of GRAs required across the two participating hospitals (2.5 whole-time equivalents; three individuals). The salaries for these individuals was identified as an additional treatment cost for the purpose of economic evaluation, and specific appointments to the posts were made by interview using an agreed job specification (available on request). We developed a clear educational content and competencies across physiotherapy, dietetics, occupational therapy, and speech/language therapy. The GRAs were trained according to these prior to starting the trial during a 1-month programme that included general education about critical illness and recognition of psychological issues after intensive care. A description of the training programme is included in Additional file 1.

We developed a comprehensive competency document covering generic and discipline-specific skills required by the GRAs for this post. Individual competencies were assessed by qualified health professionals from the relevant disciplines. GRAs were given the opportunity to observe new skills and undertake them with supervision before they were deemed competent. This process is now being formalised further with the adoption of the Calderdale Framework [54]. We planned to embed these individuals in existing NHS teams, but limited their clinical activity to patients randomised to the intervention group. This was important to protect time to ensure delivery of the intervention as intended, and also minimised or eliminated various form of bias that are problematic in rehabilitation studies, including crossover effects, performance bias, differential expertise bias, instruction bias, and bias in using screening tools [28]. It also reduced but could not eliminate the impact of learning and experience during the course of the trial.

**Final construct and taxonomy**

The final construct was agreed by a process of consensus, iteratively incorporating all of the data sources described above as they became available. The final peer review was by the Trial Steering Committee prior to submitting the final protocol for approval. Importantly, this included the independent Chair (SJB, a critical care clinician and chair of the NICE 83 GDG), a patient representative (a survivor of prolonged critical illness), and two independent content experts (a consultant and clinical manager of a medicine of the elderly service; and a consultant in rehabilitation medicine). In defining the final construct, we established a clear taxonomy to describe what was intended to occur, aiming to use this to structure the collection of process data during the trial. Wherever possible, we incorporated recommendations made in the MRC [27] and modified CONSORT guidance [28], anticipating that reporting would clearly describe what was done during the trial for both intervention and usual care groups. The parts of the patient pathway targeted by our final construct were discharge to the ward, during the acute hospital ward phase, at discharge from acute hospital, and after discharge home via telephone support (Figure 1). These included three of the five key stages identified in NICE guidance, namely ICU discharge, during ward-based care, and at discharge home (excluding during intensive care stay and formal follow-up at 2 to 3 months following hospital discharge).

The key elements of our complex intervention, their timing, frequency, healthcare workers involved, training of individuals delivering the intervention, fixed versus...
flexible elements, and degree of participation required from patients for successful delivery are shown in Table 4. This structure was adapted from suggestions by Wells and colleagues [29] to maximise information about the dimensions and context of the complex intervention. Adequate description of how the intervention was actually implemented and received by patients was expected to be vital to the internal and external validity of the findings, and interpretation of results. We incorporated processes that were identifiable, quantifiable and directly comparable into a process evaluation, which was included in the trial analysis plan. Key trial materials that operationalized the intervention, including the GRA education programme, the trigger tools used by GRAs for senior referral, the topic guides used for the consultant meeting, examples of the lay summary, the patient-centred goal-setting sheet and the discharge information letter sent to general practitioners by the GRAs are all included in Additional file 1. The trial analysis plan (which included the process evaluation plan) is available with the published protocol [30].

Discussion
We have provided a detailed account of the development of a complex rehabilitation intervention during the first 3 months following ICU discharge. In reflecting on this process, it is useful to consider whether the questions set out in the MRC complex intervention guidance were addressed during the construct development [27].

Interventions to improve recovery from critical illness could be developed to improve specific impairments (for example, leg muscle strength), specific functions (for example, ability to carry out ADLs), or specific symptoms (for example, fatigue). In practice, effective interventions are likely to affect multiple aspects of disability, including structure, function, activity, and participation domains [55], and may interact differently between patients. The intervention we describe will change care through a combination of new service development, specifically trained GRAs, and enhanced coordinated therapy across multiple rehabilitation domains. A methodological advantage of this model will be a reduced chance of bias and cross-over effects when comparing data to the parallel usual care group in the trial. In response to the perceived need for information a clear strategy to provide this will be included. We have therefore developed an intervention strategy with clearly defined components, timing, and a delivery model to implement the change.

We drew upon existing literature, a NICE guideline [36], qualitative work [31], and local data [32,33] to develop our construct and the rationale underpinning each component. Importantly, our construct was developed over a 5-year period with multiple episodes of iterative revision based on experience, internal and external review, and input from a wide range of relevant content experts and methodologists from different clinical and academic perspectives. We also engaged with patients and their families. We therefore believe that the final intervention is well supported by relevant evidence, and the plausibility of it translating into improved physical recovery, improvements in a range of other secondary outcomes, and an improved patient experience is high.

We have exerted significant effort to describe what we intend to do and a taxonomy to record and describe what actually happens in our trial. In referring heavily to the extended CONSORT guidance for reporting trials of non-pharmacologic interventions [28], we believe we will be able to address most checklist items when we report our findings. Specifically, as recommended for rehabilitation trials, we will describe numbers and timing of sessions, data on individual components of the intervention, the overall duration of different treatments, and when treatments will be tailored to individuals. The effort and resource required to provide this level of description during the trial is very substantial, but should enable detailed assessment of the key treatments that contribute to any effects observed. This detailed process evaluation will enable others to understand and implement the intervention if it is clinically effective. Importantly, it will also allow a clear description of the level of enhanced therapy that was not effective if results are negative, and clearly describe the usual care therapy that generated similar outcomes. This will be important for comparison with previous and future trials.

Existing evidence clearly indicates the need for novel approaches to rehabilitate patients after critical illness, because current disability levels are high in both physical and mental health domains [1,3,4,35]. A small randomised controlled trial published during development of our trial found improved functional outcomes in medical patients in whom an early mobilisation strategy was implemented during ICU care, compared with a usual care group receiving very limited mobilisation [49]. Recent systematic reviews of all published trials suggest mobilisation is important for recovery, although the quality of evidence is low [17-19]. These studies provide strong plausibility that an intervention coordinating enhanced physical, dietetic, and other rehabilitation will improve patient outcomes over the 3-month period following ICU discharge. We recently conducted a systematic review of costs following critical illness, but found few cost-effectiveness studies, high levels of heterogeneity, and wide variability in cost [16]. Despite variability, overall direct healthcare costs are high as the main determinant of cost is inpatient hospital stay. Analysis of potential cost-effectiveness of post-critical illness rehabilitation undertaken as part of the NICE guideline 83 [36] suggested that clinically effective interventions are very likely to be cost-effective [56]. Our
| Stage of patient pathway | Component of intervention | purpose | Structure and components | Theory/rationale | Flexibility to individual patient | Degree of active patient participation required | Healthcare professionals involved | Attributes and relevant training of healthcare professional | Location | Timing |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|--------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------|--------|
| Stage one – ICU discharge | Introduction of patient to GRA, initial assessment, and explanation of rehabilitation strategy | To establish relationship between GRA and patient | Initial meeting | Early commitment to provide individualised rehabilitation and information will promote engagement, trust and reassurance, and reduce perception of abandonment | Low | Low | GRAs together with existing rehabilitation teams (primarily physiotherapy and dietetics) | General ward; occasionally in the ICU prior to discharge | As soon as feasible following allocation to intervention group |
| | | | Formal assessment of function | | | | | | |
| | | | Setting initial rehabilitation goals | | | | | | |
| | Meeting between patient and ICU consultant, with involvement of GRA and family where appropriate | To provide information about ICU stay and likely problems during recovery | Scheduled meeting | Information will reduce stress and anxiety | Moderate | Moderate | ICU consultant | ICU consultant familiar with topic guide, knowledge of generic post-ICU issues and the individual patient history | General ward | During the first week or when deemed most appropriate by the GRA |
| | | | Topic guided discussion to cover physical and psychological sequelae of critical illness | Filling in gaps and exploring delusional memories may reduce psychological morbidity | Optional; patient may decline meeting | Meeting usually attended by GRA | |
| | | | Opportunity for patients and family to ask questions | Answering questions and providing realistic expectations may help adjustment | Meeting tailored to individual patient and family | |
| | Provision of lay summary of ICU stay | Provide information about ICU stay and likely | Lay summary dictated by consultant familiar with | Information in summary will achieve similar outcomes to the consultant visit | Moderate | Low | ICU consultant to generate summary | ICU consultant familiar with topic guide, knowledge of | General ward | During post-ICU hospital stay |
Table 4 Detailed description of the rehabilitation construct adapted from recommendations from wells and colleagues [29], the Medical Research Council framework [27], and the modified CONSORT guidance for randomised controlled trials of non-pharmacologic randomised controlled trials [28] (Continued)

| Stage two - Ward-based rehabilitation | Regular assessment by patients using a combination of clinical judgement and standardised screening tools to assess problems during recovery in understandable format |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Provide all patients written summary of information from meeting, which could be used as ongoing resource by patient and family. GRA to provide it to the patient, often with additional explanation. Manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. | Important as poor memory and other cognitive impairments may limit retention of information from meeting. Provision of self-help rehabilitation manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. |
| Manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. | Manual that improved physical function components of quality of life questionnaires when used during the first 2 months following ICU discharge. |
| GRA trained to defined competencies in each area | Vital as important areas to focus on will differ across patients and their families. |
| General ward | Throughout acute hospital stay. |
| To assess patients using a combination of clinical judgement and standardised screening tools to identify patients with potentially disabling problems during recovery in understandable format. Provide a resource to support physical rehabilitation following ICU discharge. |
| Provision of resource to support all patients' rehabilitation following ICU discharge. | Provided a resource to support recovery process. |
| Manual | Manual that improved physical function components of quality of life questionnaires when used during the first 2 months following ICU discharge. |
| GRA familiar with content and goals of manual | Important as important areas to focus on will differ across patients and their families. |
| General ward | Throughout acute hospital stay. |
| Early during the post-ICU stay | Regular structured approach by a single individual to identify and address problems across multiple areas that potentially contribute to disability. |
| Manual | Manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. |
| GRA to provide to patient post-discharge if not available prior to hospital discharge. | Important as poor memory and other cognitive impairments may limit retention of information from meeting. Provision of self-help rehabilitation manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. |
| GRA to provide to patient post-discharge if not available prior to hospital discharge. | Important as poor memory and other cognitive impairments may limit retention of information from meeting. Provision of self-help rehabilitation manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. |
| GRA to provide to patient post-discharge if not available prior to hospital discharge. | Important as poor memory and other cognitive impairments may limit retention of information from meeting. Provision of self-help rehabilitation manual provided to all patients. Use tailored to individual patients. |
| Physical function, Nutritional status and dietary intake | Use of screening tools to trigger specialist advice from: physiotherapy, dietetics, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy | Consistency across multiple relevant areas will reduce the chance of one unaddressed issue slowing overall recovery | Frequency and timing of formal assessments and use of screening tools at discretion of GRA, but expected to occur weekly | Screening and assessment largely undertaken by GRA | GRA trained in use of screening tools |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Activities of daily living | | | | | |
| Communication and swallowing | | | | | |
| Individualised goal setting | To set achievable realistic rehabilitation goals, individualised to each patient | Documented individualised goals agreed between rehabilitation team and patient | Individualised goal-setting is effective in other rehabilitation settings | High | High |
| | Regularly revised | | | | |
| | Allows patient to focus on issues important to them | | | | |
| | Intention to define achievable goals approximately weekly, but adjusted to individual patients | | | | |
| | Patient feels empowered and involved | | | | |
| | Achieving goals and documenting progress may have additional beneficial effects on psychological morbidity | | | | |
| Therapy sessions | Provide therapy sessions | Individually tailored | Physiotherapy will improve the | High | High |
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Table 4 Detailed description of the rehabilitation construct adapted from recommendations from Wells and colleagues [29], the Medical Research Council framework [27], and the modified CONSORT guidance for randomised controlled trials of non-pharmacologic randomised controlled trials [28] (Continued)

| Service                     | Therapy Goals                                                                 | Prominent Symptomatology and Treatment Achieved by Patient | Competency-Based Training in all Relevant Areas | Throughout Acute Hospital Stay |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Physiotherapy               | Designed to achieve rehabilitation goals                                      | Discrepancy between intended therapy and treatment achieved by patient strongly influenced by patient fatigue, mood, delirium, and many other issues | Planning and advice from senior rehabilitation specialists | Physiotherapy department |
| Dietetics                   | Dietetic therapy will address weight loss and barriers to nutritional recovery, such as poor appetite |                                                                         |                                               |                              |
| Occupational Therapy        | Occupational therapy will restore ability to undertake ADLs, reduce disability, and improve independence | Variable amount of therapy provided by senior specialists according to individual need | Occupational therapy department |
| Speech and Language Therapy | Speech and language therapy will treat specific swallowing problems or communication issues | Coordinated approach to therapy will reduce disability, improve quality of life, and may decrease psychological morbidity. |                                               | Other hospital areas (stairs and mobility) |
| Pre-defined sub-types of therapy to capture the processes that occurred in each session or patient encounter | Offer visit to the ICU | May help with memories and adjustment to health status | May help fill gaps for some patients | High | High |
| Accompanied ICU visit with GRA, medical staff, and family according to patient preference | ICU visit may help fill in gaps for some patients | High | GRA plus other staff according to patient preference | ICU in which patient was cared for |
| Offer visit to the ICU      | May help with memories and adjustment to health status | High | High | Any time during acute hospital stay, or after hospital discharge if preferred |

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http://www.trialsjournal.com/content/15/1/38
| Stage three – Hospital discharge planning | Liaison with ward-based staff to ensure equipment and community referrals are in place before discharge home | Ensure services and equipment are in place during the transition from hospital to the community | Liaison between the GRA and other healthcare professionals to ensure services and equipment are in place at discharge | Ensure patient has correct services and equipment in place at home for discharge | Moderately | Moderate | GRA and other healthcare staff depending on patient needs | General ward | Throughout ward stay to allow planning but in particular in the time leading up to discharge from hospital |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  | Ensuring patient is as supported at possible at the time of discharge from hospital |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Stage four – Post-hospital discharge | Provide contact details for GRA | A single point of contact to coordinate help if patient not coping in the community | Provide mobile phone number and advice to contact if required | Many patients are discharged home with significant disability | Moderate | Moderate | GRA | Community | Following hospital discharge at discretion of GRA |
|  | Telephone patient at least once following discharge | A topic guide to ensure all issues are covered | Ensure any equipment and community referrals are in place | Single point of contact to individual who knows their history well will enable rapid identification of problems and solutions | Numbers of subsequent contacts determined by | All patients and families will receive contact details | All patients will receive one unsolicited contact | Trained to mobilise relevant hospital and community teams as required | Unsolicited contact within 1 week of discharge |
|  |  |  |  | This will reduce patient/family stress, decrease chance of emergency |  |  |  |  | Ongoing contact available until primary outcome measurement |
| GP discharge summary | A discharge summary completed by the GRA to provide additional information to GPs about the impact of the critical illness on the patient | A summary of functional ability across physiotherapy, occupational therapy, dietetics and speech and language therapy | readmission, and improve efficiency of use of community rehabilitation teams | patient and family  
High  
Low | GRA | GRA familiar with the individual patient case history and status at the time of discharge | Office-based activity | Immediately following hospital discharge |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A discharge summary completed by the GRA to provide additional information to GPs about the impact of the critical illness on the patient | A summary of functional ability across physiotherapy, occupational therapy, dietetics and speech and language therapy | This information will increase their knowledge about the specific issues faced by the individual patient after a critical illness | All discharge summary letters will be completed with patient specific detail | All summaries will include standard information about the general sequelae after critical illness | Information about typical physical and psychological sequelae after critical illness | "Topic guides are available in Additional file 1. Proforma used to guide lay summary available in Additional file 1. Manual used was provided by the team that undertook the randomised controlled trial [20] and is in use in the National Health Service following the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence 83 recommendations [36]. The screening tools used are available in Additional file 1. ADLs, activities of daily living: GRA, generic rehabilitation assistant; GP, general practitioner."|
evaluate the effectiveness of enhanced multidisciplinary strategies to decrease long-term functional disability resulted in a successful funding award. Several potential interventions were not included. These included controlled strategies during the period of mechanical ventilation in ICU, where interventions to increase mobilisation or maintain muscle activity show promise as strategies to decrease long-term functional disability [17-19]. Similarly, a formal exercise programme following hospital discharge was not included, although this was not effective in a recent trial [22]. Other issues that could have been addressed included management of delirium, sleep, and early traumatic memories. Our trial will evaluate the effectiveness of enhanced multidisciplinary rehabilitation focussed mainly on the acute hospital stay following ICU discharge. It may be difficult to exclude effect modification from other interventions that were not included or controlled. Despite this, both positive and negative trial results will inform future clinical practice and research design. In developing our intervention, a challenge was balancing the potential benefits of a more complex design over a longer time frame with the risk of greater protocol non-compliance, recruitment fatigue, and reduced capability to describe process in detail. These issues are challenging in this research field, but we believe they highlight the importance of clearly describing what was done in individual trials. A recent trial of enhanced physiotherapy following ICU admission had a longer term intervention during several stages of patient recovery, but failed to achieve adequate power as a result of low recruitment rates [23].

Conclusions

The development, implementation, and evaluation of complex interventions to promote recovery following critical illness are challenging. This detailed description of the intervention used in our trial using the principles set out in the MRC complex intervention framework [27] provide important additional information to the published protocol. This should help readers understand the trial results, maximise the external validity of the data, and help others implement the intervention, if proved clinically and cost-effective. Our detailed account of construct development and description provide a model for others undertaking similar complex intervention trials.

Additional file

Additional file 1: This document provides supplementary information to help increase the understanding of the context and content of the intervention delivered during the RECOVER trial.

Abbreviations

ADLs: activities of daily living; GDG: guideline development group; GRA: generic rehabilitation assistant; HRQoL: health-related quality of life; MRC: Medical Research Council; NHS: National Health Service; NICE: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors’ contributions

TSW, LGS, JLM, PR and GH conceived the study and completed pilot and feasibility work. Specialist input to the study design and protocol development was provided by TSW, SJB and SJM (critical care perspective), LGS (physiotherapy/rehabilitation), PR and JER (nursing), JLM (dietetics), AA/H (Psychiatrist in Psychotherapy), JFF (health economics), and GDM (study design and statistics). Advice on health service reorganisation aspects was provided by GH and SJM. All authors (with the exception of SJB) were involved in the acquisition of funding. All authors contributed to the drafting and revision of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.
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Author details
1Lothian University Hospitals Division, S1 Little France Crescent, Old Dalkeith Road, Edinburgh EH16 4SA, UK. Edinburgh Critical Care Research group, Edinburgh University and NHS Lothian, Chancellors Building, 49 Little France Crescent, Old Dalkeith Road, Edinburgh EH16 4SB, UK. *Interdisciplinary Social Science in HealthNursing Studies, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, Teviot Place (Doorway 6), Edinburgh EH8 9AG, UK. †School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Dundee, City Campus, 1 T witlace Place, Dundee DD1 4HJ, UK. ‡NHS Tayside, Perth Royal Infirmary, Perth PH1 2NX, UK. §Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, The Bays, South Wharf Road, St Mary’s Hospital, London W2 1NY, UK. ‡Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh EH8 9AG, UK. 4School of Nursing and Science in Health/Nursing Studies, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, University of Dundee, City Campus, 1 Airlie Place, Dundee DD1 4HJ, UK. 5School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Dundee, City Campus, 1 Airlie Place, Dundee DD1 4HJ, UK. 6NHS Tayside, Perth Royal Infirmary, Perth PH1 2NX, UK. 7Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh EH8 9AG, UK. 8Centre for Infirmation Research, Queens Medical Research Institute, 47 Little France Crescent, Old Dalkeith Road, Edinburgh EH16 4TJ, UK.

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