

The healthy outdoors

Connecting with nature can improve health and well-being, say researchers in the *British Medical Journal*.

The theory is known as ecotherapy: restoring health through contact with nature.

Using wildlife in some therapies is reported to improve quality of life, while people who participate in conservation projects report subjective health benefits, ascribed to being outdoors and to feeling part of a greater system connecting beyond the individual. Such projects can help overcome social isolation, develop skills, and improve employment prospects, as well as provide the known benefits associated with exercise.

With 91m working days lost to mental health problems every year, plus the high costs and sometimes unwanted side-

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effects associated with drug treatments, a group of doctors, healthcare workers and farmers have proposed an alternative. Care farms, a concept developed in the Netherlands where the health service and agriculture come under the same government department, allocate patients



● Disadvantaged youths at Herefordshire BODS, an outdoor education charity, build a campfire.

and social care users funding for a range of alternative treatment options, including drug or residential treatment, or access to a woodland, market garden, working farms and other countryside resource. Activities can involve woodturning, building round houses and egg

collecting.

In the UK, care farms have so far been used mainly for educational and social care purposes or for people with learning disabilities but the newly launched National Care Farm network, is keen to follow-up the potential health care benefits of care farms in the new-year.

Dr Michael Dixon's practice in Devon is already running small-scale schemes whereby suitable patients are offered exercise prescriptions, including the opportunity to work on a conservation scheme. They even get details of the calories they have expended planting a tree. Dr Dixon, who is chairman of the NHS Alliance, believes the schemes are a remarkable example of lateral thinking. 'Why spend money on gyms or exercise equipment when we have this wonderful natural resource already available? Health, social care, the environment and British farming can all benefit from these imaginative schemes,' he says. ■



● Teenagers with severe autism at Pennyhooks Farm in Wiltshire feeding the calves.