What is uncertainty and how is it experienced in healthcare?

- The world might appear stable and solid to some, but philosophers through the ages, from Plato to Bishop Berkeley to Ludwig Wittgenstein, have argued this is an illusion – that much is uncertain.
- Uncertainty is particularly common in the complex domain of healthcare.
- Types of uncertainty are delineated in the MUCH-S model. The model was developed via framework synthesis of 94 studies.¹
  - While recognising that there are different issues of uncertainty, experiences are rarely independent, but rather, interrelated.

Managing uncertainty through resilience

- Health care systems, and professionals working in these systems, need to be flexible and adaptable to situations that may arise – uncertain situations are inevitable!
- Work together across professional groups and organisational units to navigate and manage uncertainty.
- When working together, professionals have the opportunity to learn from others, including different coping or adaptive strategies, which may promote resilience.
- A recent study revealed that staff working in a mental healthcare setting collaborated with colleagues outside of their professional group when managing uncertainty. This was not the case for all types of uncertainty. For example, there was poorer interaction when professionals encountered role (practical) uncertainty.² Therefore, there is room to explore the relationship between uncertainty, working together and resilience further.

Conclusions

- Although uncertainty is often present in the healthcare system and can have negative consequences for decision-making, quality of care, and patient management, the reality is that most of the time, professionals deliver safe and effective care.
- How do we explain this? In accordance with resilience principles, professionals flex and adapt to the situations and uncertainties they are presented with and work together to manage them.