"I do not know what is going on, but it seems Alzheimer's stops where creativity begins."

-Person living with Alzheimer's disease after creating art

It is estimated that by 2050 nearly one million Australians will have dementia. The Australian Government is making significant investments to better support people living with dementia and their families and carers. As part of our commitment to improving aged care, St Vincent’s, Melbourne has a history of innovation and excellence in the care of our client group with dementia.

There are many challenges in working with people living with the impact of dementia – where patients are experiencing impairment in memory, attention, language and problem solving as well as disorientation on time, place and person. In addition, behavioral challenges including: anxiety, aggression, agitation and apathy (the four A’s) are common. Yet improving the responsiveness of and connection with people with dementia is an important clinical aim. Given these challenges, innovative practices can enable progress where traditional ways of working with patients may not.

There is growing research that the use of art in the setting of dementia can be of therapeutic value. St Vincent’s Hospital Melbourne has an innovative and growing art program with artists in residence and art therapists already working in some areas. With some evidence that the brain may be more creative as it ages Halpern et al (2008) found that patients with Alzheimer’s who did not have consistency in memory did have stability in their aesthetic preferences [1]. Indeed, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York currently provides interactive tours of its collection of modern art for people in the early and middle stages of dementia along with their family members and carers. Specially trained Museum staff engage participants in lively dialogue by looking at iconic art from the collection. This ongoing and successful project that provides ‘interactive art looking’ illustrates that the guided viewing of art can be a rich and satisfying experience for people with dementia and their care givers [2]. In the UK researchers have illustrated the effectiveness of art as a tool for engaging people with dementia [3].

According to neurologist and author Oliver Sacks, art can tap into aspects of a person’s brain that can otherwise be unreachable; “In an informal way”, Sacks states, “I have often seen quite demented patients recognize and respond vividly to paintings and delight in painting at a time when they are scarcely responsive to words and disoriented and out of it. I think that recognition of visual art can be very deep” [4].
All health care organisations have a requirement to improve the patient experience and engage with all relevant parties in attempting to achieve this goal. In the 2008 report by respected UK charity Help the Aged, entitled ‘On Our Own Terms’, the challenge of providing and measuring dignity in care was examined. One of the criteria used for measuring dignity in care is whether the cultural, recreational and social needs of people in care are met, and whether people have choices in the activities available [5].

This objective must still be aimed for despite the challenges in achieving this, of which many have been recognised. The multiple cognitive and functional losses associated with dementia lead to reduced independence and quality of life [6][7][8]. Poorer quality of life in people with dementia is associated with lack of social contact and activity [9][10]. Unfortunately, there is often a paucity of meaningful activity available to this population. Observational studies in residential aged care facilities (RACF) find residents with dementia spending only 10% of their time in therapeutic or leisure activities [11][12], even less if they have severe cognitive or functional impairments [13][6].

As part of St Vincent’s commitment to improving aged care, we have a history of innovation and excellence in the care of our client group which has dementia. We have recognised that study results on art therapy for people with Alzheimer’s have found promising benefits [14][15][16][17]. It has even been suggested that creative processes can reinforce synaptic connections by altering neuronal structure and functioning and thus may benefit the Alzheimer’s population at a biological level [18]. Innovative programmes for those with Alzheimer’s may be crucial to improving quality of life and could potentially delay additional deterioration of mental abilities [19].

Overall, research indicates that the visual arts have been successful in improving cognition, decreasing depressive symptoms and increasing sociability. While research is underway to slow the progression of dementia and improve the quality of life for people with Alzheimers’, any advances will reduce the growing financial and social impact [21].

References:


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