

Poetry with people with dementia: An evaluation of a two year project engaging in poetry activities with older people in residential and nursing homes.

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of an evaluation of the first two years of a three year poetry project for older people with dementia. The project was set up with a poet in residence who mentored six poets to deliver poetry activities to older people and those with dementia in residential and care homes in Herefordshire.

The project was developed and run by the Courtyards Hereford. The evaluation was undertaken through the use of questionnaires that were given to staff and carers undertaking training workshops and the poets, staff and carers in the homes who facilitated the activities and finally by the residents who took part in the project.

The main findings were that participants that responded to the questionnaire for staff and carers it had increased confidence and assisted them in gaining more knowledge about the residents, whilst for residents it had a number of positive effects including enhanced communication, increased self-esteem and enhanced self-worth whilst making them feel less isolated.

Key words: Dementia, poetry, creative writing, wellbeing, self-esteem.

Introduction.

Maintaining an active mind and a good level of physical activity is important for an individual's physiological health and wellbeing ^{1,2} and there has been emerging evidence and debate around the use of poetry and creative writing in community settings to improve mental health and patient self-esteem ³. Although the therapeutic effect of arts on wellbeing has been recognised for many centuries studies are only recently being undertaken to identify their effects ³ and Mooney ² reported that primary research has found that there may be some physiological responses to certain types of poetry in the brain. However the current evidence in the literature does not necessarily review this in relation to increased quality of life, improved orientation, medication use, and the retention and recruitment of staff.

Poetry is used for people with dementia for a variety of reasons and can be for the person with dementia, the carer/family and/or staff. For the person with dementia claims are made that it; stimulates memory ^{4,2,1}, helps people make sense of their lived experiences ^{5,6}, can be a catharsis of negative emotions and validation of positive emotions to evoke feelings ^{2,6,7} as a form of communication ^{7,8}, enhance personhood and self-esteem ⁹ and help them to express distressing feeling states ⁸. For the carer/staff it can; help them gain an insight into the whole person ¹⁰, provide a greater insight for the carer in relation to self-affirmation and release of emotional baggage ⁶ as well as form a connection between the persons world and the caring professional ⁷.

However when engaging with this activity it is essential that specialists are trained to develop interpersonal skills in order to gain the confidence of the patient and be aware of potential dangers of these activities ^{11,12}. It is also important to justify resources allocated to creative production based on theory and sound evaluation ¹³.

Background to the project

The Courtyard Hereford has been involved in several arts and older people projects since 2010. One of these projects has involved creative writing and reading poetry activities for people with dementia in Herefordshire under the guidance of a poet in residence.

In order to address the issues of working with people with dementia the project included eight poetry reading and creative writing training study days aimed at examining ways of helping people with dementia to create their own poems within a group or one to one sessions. There were a further two 'reflective writing for carers workshops' where poetic techniques for self-expression was delivered to enhance reflective practice for family, carers and staff.

Four poets were initially employed to deliver the poetry programmes within the homes. These poets had received further training from the poet in residence and there was a continual mentoring process from the poet in residence. Two further poets were employed later in the project and also received training and mentoring from the poet in residence.

The poetry project evaluated involved poets providing time for the residents from three residential care homes to talk and allowed time for them to be listened to. The poets recorded, in a written format, particularly interesting or poetic elements of the conversation which they were then able to form into poems. These poems then returned to the residents for editing and agreement on the content using only the residents own words. The residents were then given their poems to share with a group, keep as private memoir or, if they wished be published.

Aims of the project

The projects aims were to assist older people to feel less isolated, improve their personal independence and create a stronger local community.

Methodology

An evaluation was undertaken following the training days from carers and staff who attended them, from residents and staff/carers engaged in the activities carried out in the homes and from the poets who were responsible for the delivery of the activity. The evaluation was conducted through the use of questionnaires with a mixture of closed and open ended questions asking the participants to comment on their views on the project from their perspective in line with the projects aims.

From the training days, sixty-three questionnaires were completed from a total of ten workshops. Eight questionnaires were completed from the placements which were completed by a daughter of a resident, friend of resident, day care coordinator, occupational support worker, two care managers and two poets. Poets also kept diaries, although these have not been used in this evaluation, and ten questionnaires were completed by the residents who took part in the activities.

Evaluation of the workshops from carers and staff

A total of ten workshops were carried out over a period of two years where sixty three participants were involved in the evaluation. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the study day. The following themes were identified.

Application to practice: Thirteen of the responses included that they would now apply this into their practice and comments included ‘... gave me ideas as to how to facilitate poetry workshops...’, .. ‘I can’t wait to start using some of these ideas’ and ‘looking forward to apply what I’ve learnt in the home’. One participant had answered positively but noted that they currently did not work in this area but felt it would be useful for the future.

Self-development: Nine of the participants noted that this had helped them with their own development with comments such as ‘ .. for my own self-awareness’, ‘I will take away a lot from this session’ and ‘learning how to preserve the important emotional content for a speaker’.

Development of new skills: forty five participants noted that they had developed new skills from the workshop. Comments included *'gave me tools to use with people with dementia...'*, *'informed my approach when working 1-1 with residents'*, *'enlarged my horizon about dementia'*, *'taking tips back to help with activities'* and *'improved knowledge of writing for reflection'*.

Increased confidence: seven people noted that this workshop had increased their confidence especially in being creative.

Insight into working with people with dementia: Ten participants had referred directly to working with people with dementia and comments included; *'I have learnt a little more about dementia'* and *'insights into working with people with dementia and into the condition'*.

Resident's evaluation form the activities in the homes

Ten residents completed questionnaires from three homes. The questionnaire encouraged the residents to identify how the project had worked for them. The themes noted from the questionnaires were as follows:

Aspects of the project that worked particularly well: all the residents had enjoyed the experience with three noting how they enjoyed chatting, two identified meeting people and three included the bringing back of fond memories.

Feeling less isolated: seven felt that the project had helped them feel less isolated. Three stated that this project had not had any effect although two noted that they were already very active with their relatives, family and within the community.

Promotion of wellbeing and quality of life: seven answered yes and one resident stated that they had *'learnt how others lifted their lives and how difficult their lives were'*

Benefits from taking part: eight made positive comments with how they have enjoyed the social interaction, stimulating, evoked memories and one realised how hard people work. One had not answered and one stated that there was no benefit but had not made any further comment.

Table 1 – statements that applied to the resident from taking part in the activity.



Evaluation of placements from the poets, carers and staff

These included three care and residential homes with a total of eight participants who answered questionnaires in relation to their placements. Of these two were residential care staff, one a friend of resident, one a daughter of resident, one day care coordinator, two poet students and one occupational support worker.

The following themes were noted from the respondents:

Encouraging residents to be creative: All eight participants were positive that the project had encouraged residents to be creative. They identified areas of thinking about happy memories and were able to use their imagination to create stories or scenarios relating to different objects or topics. They suggested that the playfulness was where people were able to be creative.

Encouraging people to engage: again all eight suggested that residents that would not previously have engaged in this kind of activity had engaged well and suggested that it had opened up more conversations for relatives/friend to discuss when visiting, they also noted that some residents appeared more confident, continued to participate in events even when the project was over and that it had assisted one resident with limited language as a result of their stroke and also one with hearing difficulties to engage with others.

Benefits to physical health: only five answered positively as several noted the difficulty in measuring change through observation. Only one answered that this was not the case but did not add any comment as to why they felt that way. For those who noted some change they suggested that this was in relation to overall wellbeing, '*shifting in mood from being shut down*

and unhappy to being communicative and engaged' and one respondent noted that this change had lasted for several hours following the activity.

Increased self-esteem; again all participants answered positively. They noted that this appeared to improve the feelings of self-worth, this was evidenced through the participants highlighting how the residents were now talking among themselves outside of the actual group meetings, how they had stated that they were looking forward to the next session, surprised at their own ability and stated that they felt valued, that they had noticed an increased pride at showing their work and increased enthusiasm to participate within activities.

Decreasing feeling of loneliness: again all participants had answered positively with comments such as how it had helped one resident to settle into the home, how some residents had joined in when normally they would not take part in group activities, the supportive and encouraging atmosphere during the activities had been very inclusive and how this activity had, by its very nature, been about intimacy and human connection.

Reduction in anxiety and depression: again only six were able to identify positively and two stated they could not comment. The positive responses were evidenced with comments such as 'seemed to have a calming and cheerful influence', one resident felt uplifted that she could talk about her feelings and express them on paper, they identified how some residents actually appeared more relaxed and animated during and after the sessions. Some noted how they had witnessed residents mood shifting and how one resident who had been diagnosed with depression had improved enough to go home. Those who did not give an answer again noted the difficulty in measuring change.

Empowered : Again seven were positive and one did not answer. They included comments such as: *'it gave them self-worth', they appeared to feel appreciated and listened to'* and *'I would judge that they felt empowered by being able to say whatever they wanted'*.

Limitations of the evaluation

This was a small scale evaluation of a larger project and was not able to measure benefits such as increased physical health, improvements in depression, quality of life or improved orientation. Questionnaires were given to participants that were willing to complete them following the session although there was no systematic format for collection of the questionnaires.

Summary

The evaluation aimed to identify areas of: isolation, independence and creation of a stronger local community through the delivery of creative and poetry activities within residential care homes. Evaluations of the project were completed through questionnaires primarily to carers and staff undertaking creative writing and poetry workshops delivered by a poet in residence. These were then followed up with evaluations from staff, carers and poets who engaged in the activities within the residential care homes and finally from the residents themselves.

The evaluations highlighted areas of self-development, development of new skills, networking, increased confidence and insight into working with people with dementia for the carer, staff and poets. Residents reported a feeling of being less isolated, had formed new relationships and affected their wellbeing. Social interaction, enhanced communication/relationship between staff and members and improved feeling of self-worth were also highlighted. The training and mentorship from the poet in residence had also helped to develop the interpersonal skills and create an awareness of the potential dangers as noted previously by Dobson ¹¹ and Mottram ¹².

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