

This section aims to provide a channel of two-way communication between researchers and practitioners in the expanding field of social, psychological and nursing research in dementia care, including all aspects of nursing and care practice, communication and the environment.

The Research Focus section of the *Australian Journal of Dementia Care* aims to keep readers up to date with the fast expanding field of social, psychological and nursing research in dementia care. By this we mean every aspect of person-to-person communication, nursing and care practice and organisation, and the influence of all aspects of the environment. The aim is to provide a channel of two-way communication between researchers and practitioners, to ensure that research findings influence practice and that practitioners' concerns are fed into the research agenda. We would like to hear from you, specifically with:

- notice of the publication (recent or imminent) of peer reviewed papers with practical relevance to dementia care;
- research reports available for interested readers;
- requests or offers for sharing information and experience in particular fields of interest.

Connections for Life with Dementia

Connections for Life with Dementia is funded by the University of Wollongong (UOW) Global Challenges program. It brings together people with dementia and their care partners with experts from social science, human geography, education, public health, engineering and information science.

'Connections' is building understanding and taking action to support and enhance the social health of people with dementia through reducing barriers and providing support for social, civic and care connections.

The project has active partnerships with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, Kiama Municipal Council, Blue Haven Care, Playgroup NSW and the IRT Foundation. Importantly, the project also draws on the expertise of people with dementia and their care partners.

Project background

Dementia is a global challenge that requires interdisciplinary thinking, collaboration and innovation to improve the lives of people living with dementia. With no effective treatment or cure in sight there is increasing urgency to support the social

Lyn Phillipson reports on an innovative research project she is leading at the University of Wollongong in NSW to support and enhance the social health of people with dementia



Residents with dementia at Blue Haven Bonaira in Kiama are being supported to make connections through the use of personalised activity scarfs and blankets. Photos courtesy Connections for Life with Dementia

health and wellbeing of people living with dementia and those at risk of developing it.

The notion of social health (Huber 2011) and its application within dementia research and practice (Droes *et al* 2017) provides an exciting platform for applied interdisciplinary research and action (Vernooij-Dassen *et al*

2018). In particular, a social health approach to research and action focuses on supporting the capacity of people with dementia to: fulfil social demands; manage their life; and participate in meaningful activities that support social connections (Droes *et al* 2017).

Connected, active and social

community environments are essential to reduce the need for institutional care and the economic costs associated with unnecessary hospitalisation (Kalache 2013; Eckermann 2017). They can also limit the decline of older people at risk of cognitive impairment and increasing co-morbidity (Huber 2011; Jeon *et al* 2018). ➤

Connections for Life with Dementia specifically explores how neighbourhood and home design (Design Connections); intergenerational play (Play Connections); and creative, personalised supports in aged care (Care Connections) can support people with dementia to live connected lives that are manageable, meaningful and comprehensible.

Care Connections

Living in residential aged care environments has been associated with poor social relationships and loneliness for residents (Casey *et al* 2016). Having moved from their own homes, many residents miss opportunities to maintain social connections, reminiscence and engage in meaningful activities (Smith *et al* 2018). During times of transition the ability to maintain social connections and remain engaged in meaningful activities become even more important. The Care Connections study, led by Dr Louisa Smith, uses a Participatory Action Research method to:

- Understand how people with dementia within a residential care setting maintain connections with their interests, one another, staff and their visitors.
- Implement and evaluate activities to support people with dementia to develop and maintain connections during transition to a new residential facility.

This study, being conducted in partnership with Kiama Council and Blue Haven Care is part of a long-term collaboration to improve the lives of people with dementia in Kiama, NSW through projects such as Dementia Friendly Kiama (<http://bit.ly/DF-Kiama>). In December 2019, Kiama Council and Blue Haven Care moved residents to a new purpose-built residential aged care facility, Blue Haven Bonaira. The Care Connections study has been established in part to support the transition to this new site and ensure that people with dementia have



Dr Louisa Smith (UOW), second from left, facilitating a session at the UOW Maker Space to inspire the 'care imagination' of the participants and support their making of personal objects for residents living with dementia at Blue Haven Bonaira

opportunities to connect with what is important to them.

Using a Participatory Action Research approach, the Care Connections team is working with staff, care partners, residents and other stakeholders to understand, explore and put into action creative ways to support residents with dementia during the move and settling-in period.

Through journey mapping and world café focus groups, over 70 staff and care partners were consulted around the challenges and opportunities for people with dementia as they moved to the new facility. Care partners, staff and management at Blue Haven, along with an interdisciplinary team of academics from UOW, were consulted through creative brainstorming sessions around what would best maximise these opportunities and address the challenges.

The Care Connections team observed residents with dementia in their everyday lives before the transition to the new facility. Insights from this research highlighted that the opportunities for residents to 'connect' with their interests, with one another, with staff and their visitors was limited by their access to personal objects and belongings.

In response, Care Connections has partnered with a local social enterprise,

Mindful Generations (www.mindfulgenerations.com.au), to co-design personalised Scarf-es with people with dementia, care partners, staff and volunteers. The Scarf-e is a large scarf with clip-on activity items (tactile, cognitive, visual and reminiscence) as well as pockets for glasses or other personal items. It enables the wearer to access those items and engage with the activities whenever they choose to, without having to wait or rely on someone to provide them (AJDC 2019). The project will also support co-design of Life Boxes and Life Story Books to encourage the residents' sense of identity and establish a stronger basis for their social connections.

A partnership with the UOW Maker Space (<http://bit.ly/UOW-makerspace>) is also allowing people with dementia, staff and families to make personal objects for their Scarf-es and Life Boxes. During 2019/2020 Louisa and the team are studying the impact of these resources on supporting connections before, during and after the transition to the new facility.

Play Connections

Intergenerational interactions can promote multiple benefits for young and old alike, as well as for society as a whole (Whitehouse & George 2018). Intergenerational playgroups

(IGPs) are one way for supporting interactions between young and old, including people with dementia (Phillipson & Johnson 2018). Well-designed programs can offer the possibility for valuable experiences that can enhance quality of life (Cartmel *et al* 2018) and may also have other physical and cognitive benefits for people with dementia (Baker *et al* 2017).

The Play Connections project, led by Professor Lisa Kervin (with her team from Early Start) brings together a unique interdisciplinary team to build the evidence base for supported play programs for people with or at risk of dementia, children (birth to five years) and their parents/carers in both early learning and aged care settings. The study is exploring and theorising the interactions that take place in these settings and how different aspects of the environment and supported facilitation can improve the Ways to Wellbeing (Connecting, Learning, Giving, Taking Notice, and Being Active) (Aked *et al* 2008) for all involved.

During 2019, in collaboration with Playgroup NSW and IRT Foundation, the Play Connections team has used observational and survey research within existing playgroups in residential aged care settings to inform design principles for supported Intergenerational Playgroups. These initial principles have been further tested through Intergenerational Play Dates hosted at UOW's Early Start's



Connecting the generations using art therapies at an Early Start Intergenerational Play Date during 2019

Playful Learning Space.

This is the first time a dedicated program targeting older people has been hosted in the UOW facility. Before the start of these Play Dates an environmental audit was undertaken against dementia design principles for public buildings (Fleming *et al* 2017) with subsequent modifications to signage, human resources and furniture to enable the participation of people with dementia and young families.

Play sessions have focused on exploring how different activities facilitated by experts (eg music and movement and art therapy) promote the Ways to Wellbeing (Aked *et al* 2008) for all participants across the generations. A key contribution to this has been the development of an inter-generational pedagogical framework to inform the field. The research team has implemented a Virtual Ethnographic Toolkit to enable video capture and subsequent analysis of the group activities. Two new IGP's will be established in 2020 to further build upon the intergenerational pedagogical framework as factors that support intergenerational connections, as well greater understanding of the logistics of bringing together the generations to promote ways to wellbeing for all involved.

UOW, Playgroups NSW and IRT Foundation will be supporting the two new IGP's in Wollongong in 2020 during school terms:

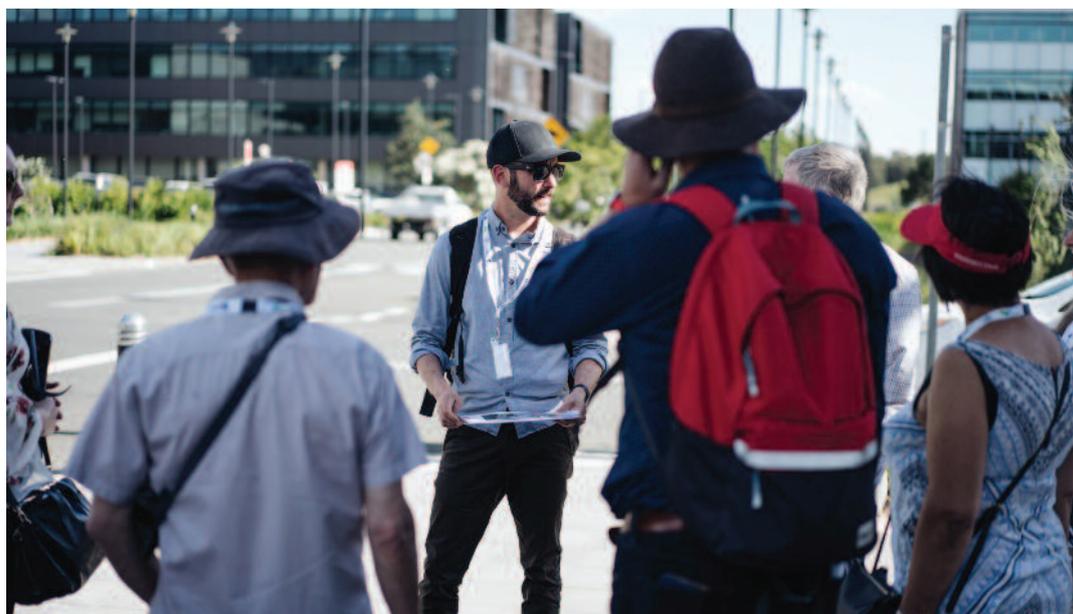
- The Early Start

Intergenerational Play Group hosted in the Early Learning Space (UOW), will be run the first Wednesday morning of each month (9.30am-11am).

- The IRT Intergenerational Play Group hosted at IRT Wellness Centre (Woonona), will be run the third Wednesday morning of each month (10.30am-12pm).

Design Connections

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of people with dementia live in community settings. Whilst limited, there is



Dr Chris Brennan-Horley (UOW), centre (wearing cap), providing a practical session for researchers and other key stakeholders on dementia-friendly design principles at the UOW Innovation Campus

growing evidence that the design of buildings (Fleming *et al* 2016; Fleming *et al* 2017; Tartarini *et al* 2017), streets (Mitchell & Burton 2006) and neighbourhoods more broadly (Ward *et al* 2018) can either support people with dementia to maintain their connections – and other Ways to Wellbeing – or hinder them. As our communities become more urbanised, it is critical to establish more evidence regarding how urban environments can support ageing in place, wellbeing and connectedness for those with dementia, as well as those at risk of developing it.

The Design Connections study, led by Dr Chris Brennan-Horley (human geographer) brings together a team of urban designers, design psychologists, engineers, public health practitioners and people with dementia. It is exploring how neighbourhood and home design supports or hinders the quality of life of people with dementia living in the community. Of interest is how building level and neighbourhood design supports social connections, engagement in meaningful activities, feelings of safety, choice and control and feelings of inclusion and respect.

Phase 1 of the study involves interviews with people with

dementia and their care partners who are living in apartments in the Wollongong CBD. To support these interviews, the research team has developed a new tool to audit current apartments against established dementia-friendly design principles (Fleming & Purandare 2010).

In Phase 2, the focus will shift to neighbourhood-level auditing, participatory mapping and walking interviews. The findings from both studies will be brought together through case analysis (Emmel & Clarke 2009) to gain new insights into the relationship between neighbourhood/home design and quality of life for people with dementia. The research also has the potential to support small-scale strategies for improving our participants' neighbourhoods.

The findings will be used to develop a set of principles which will be useful in understanding the key design features important for supporting people with dementia to remain connected as they age in place.

Knowledge exchange, impact

From the outset, Connections for Life with Dementia has been committed to undertaking research that provides real benefit (impact) for people with

dementia, care partners and services. In order to achieve this, we have established what we call a Knowledge Exchange Centre (KEC). Led by Karen Larsen-Truong, the KEC supports dissemination of findings as well as the mutual exchange of ideas and expertise to encourage:

- engagement with the research
- capacity building
- dissemination, translation and utilisation of findings
- impact through changes to knowledge, practices and policies.

The key aspects of the KEC include:

- Integrating the lived experience expertise of people with dementia and their care partners into all aspects of the project.
- Knowledge sharing and capacity building within the university research team (workshops, mentoring, sharing expertise).
- Activities to promote knowledge exchange with relevant stakeholders to support co-creation of knowledge, dissemination and utilisation of new knowledge.

During 2020, the KEC will maximise access and awareness of new knowledge generated

from the research through the creation of plain language resources. These will include:

- A better practice guide for Supported Intergenerational Playgroups.
- Dementia Enabling Assessment Tool for the home environment (DEAT-Home) and another for use in auditing neighbourhoods and local precincts.

Conclusion

Through a focus on social health, this innovative interdisciplinary research project intends to promote connectedness and quality of life for people living with dementia.

To keep up to date with the progress of this research you can subscribe to the 'Connections' newsletter here (www.uow.edu.au/global-challenges/living-well-longer/pieces/). Otherwise, please contact Associate Professor Lyn Phillipson at the University of Wollongong (lphillip@uow.edu.au). ■



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Evidence for Art and Dementia

A research study has evaluated the psychophysiological effects of attending the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) Art and Dementia program over six weeks and concluded that the program appears to have measurable benefits. Certain salivary biomarkers are now known to be non-invasive objective outcome measures of stress reduction interventions: this study investigated the levels of salivary biomarkers of cortisol and interleukin-6 in 25 program participants with dementia, as well as quality of life (QoL), depressive symptoms, cognition, and wellbeing, before, initially after and then six weeks after attending the NGA Art and Dementia program. Participants were found to have improved hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (central stress response) function, fewer self-reported depressive symptoms, and improvements in memory and verbal fluency. The authors conclude that a longer controlled trial is now needed. The article was published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* and is available to read in full at <https://bit.ly/2Y28GdZ>.

Cochrane review of ACE-III and mini-ACE

Researchers at the Universities of Leicester and Glasgow in the UK have conducted a Cochrane systematic review in order to find out how accurate the Addenbrooke's Cognitive Examination III (or ACE-III) and its shorter version (the mini-ACE) are in identifying dementia and mild cognitive impairment across a range of healthcare settings. The review included seven studies with a total of 1711 patients; four studies examined the ACE-III, and three examined the mini-ACE. The authors conclude that overall, the quality, size, and number of included studies has not allowed a definitive conclusion on whether the ACE-III or the mini-ACE should be used to identify dementia or MCI, and that until more research is done, the ACE-III or mini-ACE should only be used as part of a clinical assessment when making a diagnosis of dementia, and not relied upon alone. The findings only relate to use in a hospital setting, as none of the studies investigated community or general populations. More research is needed to investigate the ACE-III and mini-ACE in different healthcare settings, languages, and cultures. The review is available to access at <https://bit.ly/36j3TXN>.