

Creating supportive environments

Nick Seemann introduces a new DTA online course which aims to inspire learners to rethink the possibilities of physical environments, with a primary focus on care homes

In September 2020, Dementia Training Australia (DTA) launched a new free online course, titled *Creating Supportive Environments for People Living With Dementia*, which explores why physical environments matter for people living with dementia. The course introduces learners to basic ideas about how the design, configuration and set-up of buildings and gardens can support or curtail the independence, social engagement and daily activity of those who use or live in that building.

While the content is applicable to a range of settings, the course focuses on improving care homes. It is aimed at care staff, management, building and design professionals, and emphasises the application of design theory to practice. The course has been prepared for a broad audience in recognition that environmental changes require the involvement of a multidisciplinary team: management, design professionals and care staff. While management may be gatekeepers to a project, care staff have a fundamental role in



Architect and DTA's Lead Environments Consultant Nick Seemann

the daily activities that realise the changes in practice.

Mentoring program

The course is available for individuals to complete for their own professional development. It will also feature in a new mentoring program led by DTA's Environments consultancy, where DTA will work with a team of people within a facility to audit the existing environment, diagnose problems and then plan change.

To begin, the facility's multidisciplinary team will complete the online *Creating Supportive Environments* course together to create a shared foundation to the project development work that follows. The project work may be an operational change (such as the removal of clutter or greater support to enable residents to access gardens), a small refurbishment (such as the creation of a more usable kitchen) or a larger renovation.

Positive examples

The course format was inspired by Damon Gameau's documentary *2040*, which uses positive examples of environmental initiatives to



Examples of well-designed environments for people living with dementia. Top: Peninsula Villages Tearoom refurbishment, Woy Woy; above left: a shaded courtyard in an aged care facility; above right, a corridor refurbishment design developed by Constructive Dialogue Architects

encourage people to embrace climate solutions that already exist. Similarly, this DTA course is heavily based on interviews with architects and facility managers, who each explain how their care homes support resident independence, comfort and safety. Much of the material has been developed through online video interviews conducted during the pandemic lockdown.

Three modules

The course has three modules, each requiring about an hour to complete. The first module, *Why Environments Matter*, explains the negative effects of clutter, noise and busyness on people living with dementia and shows how a building can support mobility, orientation and engagement in an active life.

The second module, *Exploring Good Places to Live*, showcases good practice examples from around the world and encourages participants to look for features that are applicable to their own work situation.

The final module (*Transforming Buildings and the Organisations That Run Them*) focuses on what the learner can do to bring about change in the built environment where they work.

Conclusion

While care homes can sometimes be disempowering and disabling places, there are many examples of care facilities that support people with dementia to thrive. Our hope is that the course will help both individual learners and organisations to create better buildings and more usable gardens. ■

To access the course, *Creating Supportive Environments for People Living With Dementia*, visit www.dta.com.au/online-courses/creating-supportive-environments/.

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