

Igniting the Spark of Life

Five years after adopting the *Spark of Life* Philosophy to dementia care and three years after becoming the world's first *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence, New Zealand's Mercy Parklands aged care home is continuing to report positive outcomes for residents with dementia, their families and staff. **Helen Delmonte** explains

Mercy Parklands is a non-profit residential aged care facility owned by the Sisters of Mercy in Auckland, providing high-level care for residents.

Between 50-60% of our 97 residents are living with dementia. There's a small non-secure home environment area for 13 of those residents with dementia. We also provide for residents needing palliative and interim care, and those aged under 65. We employ 126 staff from a diverse range of cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds, with 21 different nationalities represented.

On 14 February 2014, Mercy Parklands was officially recognised by Dementia Care Australia as the world's first *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence.

To become a *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence an organisation must spend a minimum of two years strategically implementing the *Spark of Life* Philosophy and demonstrate that it has gone beyond the minimum standards for meeting the emotional needs of all individuals in its care.

The Spark of Life Philosophy

Spark of Life was developed by Jane Verity, Founder and CEO of Dementia Care Australia, and Hilary Lee, President of *Spark of Life* and launched in 2007. It is a 'whole systems approach' to dementia care implemented in residential and community aged care organisations to enable rehabilitation and 'reementia' (the regaining of lost cognitive and functional abilities) through enriching relationships and the culture of care in an organisation.

The focus is on the quality of the connection between the carer and the person with dementia and aims to foster kindness, compassion, empathy, respect and an attitude of unconditional love in interactions between care staff and clients.

One of its benefits is that it teaches how to implement the essence of Professor Tom Kitwood's person-centred care – supporting each person as an individual with a unique personality, biography, physical health status, cognitive abilities and social psychology.

In 2010 I was among the first group of International Master Practitioners to



Dementia Care Australia Founder and CEO Jane Verity (left) with the author and Mercy Parklands Allied Health Manager and *Spark of Life* Master Practitioner Helen Delmonte (centre), and Mercy Parklands CEO Ann Coughlan in February this year when Mercy Parklands received its third certification as a *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence

graduate from Dementia Care Australia's inaugural *Spark of Life* Master Practitioner Course in Perth, along with participants from Denmark, Germany, Canada, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia.

Implementing *Spark of Life* into Mercy Parklands' organisational culture over the past five years has enriched the lives of our residents with dementia, enabling them to experience improvements in mental abilities, language, self-esteem, social interactions and emotional well-being.

Centre of Excellence criteria

In order to become a Centre of Excellence, we have had to meet specific criteria set by Dementia Care Australia, including:

- 100% ongoing support for the philosophy from the board, CEO and leadership team.
- Having at least one in-house registered

Spark of Life Master Practitioner who is responsible for all *Spark of Life* education and implementation throughout the organisation, from the board and CEO to volunteers and family members, and who spends at least 50% of their work time in this role. Master practitioners are leaders, managers or educators within an organisation who have undergone the three-week certified *Spark of Life* Master Practitioner Course, run by Dementia Care Australia in Perth, WA twice yearly. The education includes understanding people with dementia and techniques for dissolving distressed behaviour and restoring dormant language.

- 70% of staff educated by their master practitioner in the three-day *Spark of Life* Practitioner Course.
- Having an active Torchbearers program (Torchbearers are staff members from throughout the organisation selected to act as role models for the program and provide genuine on-the-spot appreciation and encouragement to their colleagues).
- A regular *Spark of Life* Club program for all residents that is evaluated every six months using the Creative-Expressive Abilities Assessment (CEAA) tool (Gottlieb-Tanaka *et al* 2008). (The CEAA is designed to obtain information about the expressive abilities of older people with dementia, focusing on a range of abilities that have shown improvement when elders participated in creative activity programs). The club program is an interactive, therapeutic group program used in residential care and day centres to address the social, emotional, cultural and spiritual needs of people at all levels of dementia, and can be adapted to suit those who don't have dementia.
- Evidence that *Spark of Life* has been implemented in all areas of resident / client care.
- Completing and passing the Dementia Care Australia *Spark of Life* Self-Assessment process, which includes providing written and video evidence and evaluations of quality improvement, and resident, staff and family satisfaction surveys. ➤

The Spark of Life Philosophy

A number of studies have been undertaken on *Spark of Life* and there has been extensive clinical application of the approach in Australia and internationally, which has provided anecdotal data demonstrating the program's effectiveness. A qualitative study from Curtin University, Perth, Australia, examined the perceptions of carers and families of the impact of the therapeutic *Spark of Life* Club Program on the personal and emotional well-being of people with dementia (Lee 2007)

In 2009 *Spark of Life* received the International Association of Homes and Services for the Ageing (IAHSA) Excellence in Ageing Services Award for its 'whole systems approach' towards rementia and dementia rehabilitation.

There are now 48 *Spark of Life* master practitioners in nine countries. While Mercy Parklands in New Zealand is the first *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence, six new Centres of Excellence are likely to be recognised within the next 12 to 18 months, with others following. In Australia there are currently registered Master Practitioners working in two community care settings, two residential care facilities and one rural facility and one as a design consultant in dementia care facilities.

Reference

Lee H (2007) *The impact of the Spark of Life program on the personal and emotional well-being of people with dementia: carers' and families' perceptions*. Perth: Curtin University of Technology.

– Jane Verity and Hilary Lee

The search for better care

Achieving *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence status was the culmination of a five-year journey for Mercy Parklands and its staff, beginning in 2010, when we introduced the *Spark of Life* Philosophy to the organisation with the aim of developing our culture and environment to better meet the needs of residents with dementia and improve the understanding and skills of staff working with those residents.

I began working at Mercy Parklands in 2002 as an occupational therapist and over the next few years came to realise that while the number of our residents with dementia was increasing, our service was still focused on those who were cognitively and functionally able. These residents had an excellent social program, but we felt those with dementia were missing out on meaningful stimulation and interaction, especially if they had limited verbal communication. This was partly because we lacked the knowledge and skills to implement appropriate care for people with dementia. This may also have contributed to the high number of resident falls and incidents of distressed behaviour.

In 2009, Mercy Parklands embarked on a quality improvement project to investigate options to help address these issues and enhance the lives of our residents with dementia. At this time we became aware of the *Spark of Life* Philosophy and a group of us attended a seminar in New Zealand, presented by Jane Verity, where we learnt about the

therapeutic *Spark of Life* Club Program and felt inspired to start implementing this for our residents.

Implementing Spark of Life

After purchasing and studying the *Spark of Life* Club program educational package, which includes a comprehensive manual and DVDs, we introduced the first *Spark of Life* Clubs for our residents with dementia. (We've since expanded this program to include all our residents if they choose).

Observations and feedback from staff and family members showing that the club members were more focused, engaged, contented and enjoying themselves gave us evidence that the program was going to benefit our residents with dementia and the motivation and inspiration to expand the *Spark of Life* Philosophy throughout the facility to include residents without dementia.

Impressed with the results of the club program, Mercy Parklands' CEO and board supported me to undertake the three-week international *Spark of Life* Master Practitioner Course and then in July 2010, committed to introduce the philosophy as a 'whole systems approach' throughout the organisation. I was appointed to the management team to lead the implementation.

Our aim was to create a supportive and understanding social and emotional environment to enable the potential for rehabilitation and 'rementia' (Kitwood 1997). Rementia is the recovery of lost abilities when the social and emotional

environment becomes more understanding and caring.

We focused on providing appropriate services for the different needs of our residents, developing our workforce skills in supporting those residents, and improving clinical outcomes to reduce the incidence of resident falls and distressed behaviour.

We developed a culture change plan, identifying qualitative and quantitative measures to monitor our change progress, and a step-by-step process for implementing the *Spark of Life* Philosophy.

The CEO and management team worked to systematically embed the philosophy into all areas of practice, from policies and staff employment to special person-centred care initiatives.

Staff education has been a key component of our success with the philosophy. All staff receive an initial orientation to *Spark of Life* and can then undertake the education to become *Spark of Life* Certified Practitioners. At our facility the three-day course is run over six sessions, two to three times a year. All our management team, senior nursing staff, allied health and pastoral care teams and many health care assistants are now *Spark of Life* Certified Practitioners.

Staff also have the opportunity to become *Spark of Life* Torchbearers. Regular Torchbearer gatherings include team-building exercises and continued education on *Spark of Life* techniques and skills to help grow and maintain the positive energy and culture around the facility.

The club program

The therapeutic *Spark of Life* Club Program has been a major factor in improving our residents' sense of well-being. Introducing and expanding this program required extensive redevelopment of our existing activities



The Mercy Parklands Torchbearers – staff members who act as role models for the philosophy

programs and social aspects of our community to better meet the emotional needs of the residents and ensure it adhered to the *Spark of Life* Club Program framework and principles.

We continued to add more *Spark of Life* Sunshine Clubs for residents with dementia and then refocused our other activity programs to give all residents the opportunity to belong to a club that suited their interests and ability level.

'The Men's Club', 'Young at Heart' club, art and gardening clubs and 'The Ark' chapel club are now all part of our weekly program and we have 13 staff trained as club program facilitators. There's a maximum of eight people in each club and two facilitators.

The facilitators are not 'entertainers' and we don't do competitive activities or quizzes. The club program shifts the focus from residents being 'entertained' or passively involved in activities, towards having more active and meaningful engagement.

The clubs create a sense of belonging, bringing together people with similar interests and ability level. Each resident is invited to join a club which matches their interests and ability in areas such as communication, concentration and participation. The facilitators are taught specific skills to use with each activity and how to adjust them to each person's level of ability so everyone can gain a sense of achievement. This helps people feel safe and able to contribute without fear of failure.

For example in the Level 1 Sunshine Club, for people with dementia who communicate non-verbally, the activities focus on things such as gentle loving contact, music, colour (eg lifting a parachute filled with coloured balloons or leaves) or gentle humour. Residents with good long-term memories are invited to join a club where members engage in a lot of reminiscence-style activities.

Each club has its own specific rituals and ceremonies and follows a set framework, with a welcome/beginning ritual, a main activity and an ending ritual (such as morning or afternoon tea, or a song), which help cement that feeling of safety and belonging. The Level 1 Sunshine Club begins with the members passing around a small heart-shaped cushion that 'beats with love from one person to the next' and residents will often place it on their heart as it's passed to them.

The men's club members begin by greeting each other with a handshake, while in another club passing around a giant balloon provides focus and

energises everyone.

The club program provides opportunities to meet the *Spark of Life* Five Core Emotional Needs for individual club members: feeling needed and useful; opportunity to care; to love and be loved; to have self-esteem boosted by encouraging and supporting individuals' positive qualities; and having the power to choose.

Positive outcomes of Spark of Life

Since introducing the *Spark of Life* Philosophy in 2010 we have demonstrated positive outcomes for our residents, including those with dementia, staff and families across a range of areas as a direct result of the philosophy. These include an exceptional reduction in falls, an ability to systematically dissolve distressed behaviours in a sustainable and lasting way, residents experiencing rehabilitation and dementia, staff being empowered and revitalised, and appreciation from families:

Club program benefits: Within weeks of starting the club program for residents with dementia we started to see positive outcomes with the awakening of dormant abilities, such as language and movement, and noticeable improvements in individuals' level of communication ability and behaviour, both during the club sessions and at other times. Residents with dementia who did not normally communicate verbally started talking or interacting in other ways; we saw improvement in functional ability – residents who would

normally sit passively were now picking up finger food, pouring tea for each other (we enabled this by having a number small teapots that residents could manage independently, instead of one large, heavy pot), passing round the cake, and picking up and looking at things. Previously, we had not been giving people the opportunity to use dormant abilities and when we set up the environment and activities in a way that enabled them to do things we found those abilities had more potential to come to the fore.

Reduction in distressed behaviour: From 2009 the median incidence of residents' distressed behaviour has reduced by 35.7% with the *Spark of Life* Philosophy being the key factor. For the past three years Mercy Parklands has been able to retain all residents with distressed behaviours, where in the past some have had to be transferred to external secure dementia units. Also, there has been no significant incidents of distressed behaviour for the past 12 months in the dementia specific (non-secure) area.

Reduction in falls: Our falls prevention program uses the *Spark of Life* principles as the framework, with a significant decrease in falls since 2009. There has been a 48.6% decrease in the median incidence of falls, with a 58% decrease in falls with serious harm from 2014 to 2015. In 2013, our facility was chosen by the NZ Health Quality and Safety Commission to feature in a series of educational DVDs on falls prevention.

Resident satisfaction: In a 2015 internal

Family, staff feedback

"As time went on, more and more staff were trained in the ways of the *Spark of Life*. This made a big difference to how Mum and the other residents here at Mercy Parklands were on a day-to-day basis. The love, the dignity, compassion, along with the *Spark of Life* Philosophy, shown to all residents here meant that they can live life to the fullest potential and be allowed to make choices for themselves, also giving them independence. Mum's personal health also improved from the time of *Spark of Life* starting here. I put this down to the ability to communicate again and the trust she had with the people that were caring for her. I am proud my mother, Moira, is the 'poster girl' for *Spark of Life* here at Mercy Parklands."

– Robyn Warin, family member

"We have found that the *Spark of Life* Philosophy enhances our values as we carry out our mission working towards creating a caring, compassionate community. In fact I believe that the *Spark of Life* Philosophy is about our values and provides us a way to express them as we work to keep hope alive."

– Sister Sheryl James, RSM, Pastoral Care, *Spark of Life* Torchbearer, Mercy Parklands



Mercy Parklands resident and Sunshine Club member Moira McKeown with *Spark of Life* Torchbearer and club facilitator Julie Knott

resident satisfaction survey, the *Spark of Life* clubs were rated 87.5% important and enjoyable (the top rating) by residents who responded to that question. In a specific *Spark of Life* Resident Satisfaction Questionnaire in August 2013, the residents were asked to score between 0 and 5 (5 being the highest) on five questions, which included whether they felt loved and understood, valued, needed and useful and joyful. The overall average score on the five questions from 50 residents was 86% scoring 3 or over.

Family satisfaction: In an independent report by Press Ganey (a company specialising in health care satisfaction and improvement in NZ and Australia) containing data from 36 Mercy Parklands residents' families from an August 2015 survey, we scored 87.2 which was higher than the previous year. The activities at Mercy Parklands scored higher than 99% of the other facilities in the database, with *Spark of Life* Club facilitators and the clubs receiving positive comments in the survey feedback.

Staff satisfaction: The *Spark of Life* Philosophy has increased staff knowledge and skills and improved staff

confidence and competence in finding alternative solutions to meeting residents' needs and reducing distressed behaviour. A 2013 independent staff satisfaction survey by Press Ganey showed that Mercy Parklands' overall mean score was in the 91st percentile nationally. Our staff retention score was 8.8 (a score between 1-10 indicates strong loyalty and limited staff turnover expected in the next 12 months).

Future goals

Obviously we believe the benefits of holding the title of the world's first *Spark of Life* Centre of Excellence are immense: making a significant difference in the lives of our residents and knowing we are doing the very best for them; good standing in our field; high occupancy; positive clinical outcomes; and staff with skills and commitment.

We're currently working to introduce further initiatives such as the *Spark of Life* In Action project which includes reducing the use of behaviour-modifying medication by identifying and implementing meaningful *Spark of Life* Solutions as well as complementary therapies including doll, pet and music therapy.

Our vision is to continue working alongside Dementia Care Australia to achieve these initiatives in order to maintain our Centre of Excellence status, and possibly even become the world's first education centre for *Spark of Life!* ■

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To find out more about the outcomes from the program implemented at Mercy Parklands or the *Spark of Life* International Master Practitioner course, email info@dementiacareaustralia.com. The next *Spark of Life* Master Course will be held in Perth from 7-27 May this year.

References

Gottlieb-Tanaka D, Lee H, Graf, P (2008) *Creative-Expressive Abilities Assessment: user guide*. Canada: ArtScience Press.
Kitwood T (1997) *Dementia reconsidered: the person comes first*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Arts Festival of Dementia a first for Australia

By Gail Kenning

In 2018, Sydney will host Australia's first Arts Festival of Dementia and organisers are keen to hear from people interested in getting involved.

A team of international and Australian artists, curators and researchers, led by Professor Jill Bennett, Director of the National Institute of Experimental Arts, Art and Design at the University of NSW (UNSW) are planning a city-wide arts event that will take a cultural approach to exploring scientific, clinical and medical understandings and approaches to dementia; the impact on the lives of those living with dementia; how society cares for people with dementia; and how dementia can be a creative force.

The festival, which organisers believe is possibly the first of its kind in the world, will not only include artwork about dementia, but will involve people living with dementia and those caring for people with dementia as participants, advisors and audience members.

Professor Bennett's team is currently looking for people who are willing to act as advisors, be involved in determining how to evaluate the success of such events for people with dementia, who want to engage with art or just want to know more about the event.

"The Arts Festival of Dementia will focus on exploring changed perceptions of the world, and the various perspectives of those living with dementia, caring for people with dementia, or carrying out research on dementia," Professor Bennett said.

Errol Francis, Director of The Anxiety Arts Festival first held in London in 2014, is working with Professor Bennett and her team



Professor Jill Bennett, Director of the National Institute of Experimental Arts, Art and Design, UNSW, is leading a team of artists, curators and researchers in planning the Arts Festival of Dementia in Sydney in 2018. Photo: Dan White

to produce The Anxiety Arts Festival in Sydney in 2017, followed by the Arts Festival of Dementia in 2018.

The London Anxiety Arts Festival was a city-wide, month-long festival of art that explored anxiety, its causes and effects. It consisted of a dynamic program of visual art, film, performance, music, dance, theatre and talks at arts organisations, universities, health care institutions and community centres.

For more information about the Arts Festival of Dementia and how to become involved, email gail@gailkenning.com.

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