

Changing the World of People Living with Dementia Using Montessori

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present at your conference. I am delighted to be able to share my work with you and show how the Montessori philosophy and methods can be used not only at the beginning of the life cycle but also at the end.

Can you imagine what it might be like to walk down a hall and, along the way, find that you have absolutely no idea where you are? Can you imagine having a loved one sitting by your side referring to you as “Mom” or “Dad” but have no idea who this person is? Or a stranger who you have never seen before insist you remove your clothes for a shower? How devastating would it be to encounter these situations throughout each and every day? Would you become agitated and upset, or depressed and anxious? Now add to that a day that is void of activity, meaning and orientating, supportive information. Imagine how it must feel to need the toilet or your room but not be able to find it. Imagine a world that lacks the information you need to help you find your way and/or remain purposefully engaged in life. And then, when you try to do things for yourself you find you don’t remember how, or the things you need to do are just simply too challenging and complex. When you try to communicate your messages, no one seems to understand. Generally, everything seems to be a challenge, and you feel that you are no longer engaged in life and living. Life simply offers few successes and opportunities, to enjoy meaningful relationships seems to have completely disappeared and so you spend your days confused, frightened and waiting.

This is the reality of many people living with dementia. The number of people affected by dementia is alarming and the costs associated with the disease are enormous. It is well recognized that dementia not only takes a tremendous toll on those people living with the disease but also on care providers, families, health and social services. And there is no cure in sight.

Dementia has often been referred to as the long goodbye. Along with the diagnosis comes a variety of challenges which are closely associated to the devastating effects of memory loss, including

cognitive decline becomes more and more apparent with a combination of behavioural concerns such as wandering, repetitive questioning and agitation. As the number of people living with dementia continues to rise it becomes increasingly important to find meaningful, purposeful and enjoyable activities, at the person's own level of ability which are designed to enhance quality of life. Appropriate evidence-based interventions are needed to help people with dementia end this last chapter of life with dignity, respect, meaning and a sense of worth.

I have worked in the area of dementia care for about 30 years and whilst during this time I have seen lots of good changes in how we care for people living with dementia, I continued to search for that elusive aged care holy grail. Along the way, there were some Wow moments. Those times when clarity, purpose and new paths were identified and practices changed.

The biggest Wow moment of my career happened in Adelaide a few years ago when by sheer luck I was in the right place at the right time and had the opportunity to participate in a workshop facilitated by Dr Cameron Camp from the USA on using Montessori principles in the development of activities for people living with dementia. Sometime during that first half day the penny dropped and I had found the aged care holy grail that I had been in search of for years. Here it was in all its simplicity and so my passion for Montessori was ignited.

Nearly 80 years after Maria Montessori introduced her philosophy and educational methods, Cameron Camp, then a young Psychology Professor, examined the Montessori philosophy and principles and discovered important connections to dementia care. Dr Camp recognized that these same principles could be modified for dementia and adapted as a philosophy for dementia care. This epiphany was responsible for the work that was to become a framework for dementia programming.

Dr Camp was particularly drawn to Dr Montessori's emphasis on the person, including the dignity and respect that was central to all aspects of her work. Her vision was to develop the minds of young children with the purpose of building independence, self-esteem and a promising future. People living with dementia also need these things.

Montessori methods for dementia focus on supporting both the person living with dementia and the environment in which they live. The techniques are intended to engage people with dementia in life and living, by providing an environment that supports their losses and circumvents their deficits whilst providing meaning and purpose to their day.

Montessori methods for dementia focus on a form of learning that fits within the framework of rehabilitation and excellent overall dementia care. While activities adapted within the context of rehabilitation are not expected to return the person to his/her pre-morbid state, they can be used to maintain and enhance cognitive, psychosocial and physical function. For some people the use of Montessori activities can enable them to re-learn skills required for activities of daily living. I want to show you Tren. This video was made by a student who completed Montessori training with me. Whilst there are some obvious faults with the footage you will see what can be achieved when we change what we do.

Memory deficits can be circumvented by putting the information into the environment. Because remembering information for any length of time is difficult for the person living with dementia the information needs to be put into the environment. The person is able to access the information when needed rather than trying to remember what is often too difficult to recall from their memory bank.

One of the main strategies used by Montessori was that of creating a physical environment that would stimulate the senses, encourage exploration and provide opportunities for engagement in activities. A supported environment was critical for the success and independence of her children and the same applies for people living with dementia.

With a feeling that they are no longer useful or able to contribute to their community a sense of despair and worthlessness can begin to take hold. These feelings can be avoided if people are encouraged to do things for themselves if they are able to and by providing opportunities for them to make contributions to their world. We can do this by assigning meaningful roles and routines that are based on a

We cannot change a person's level of dementia but we can work around the dementia by provision of an appropriate supportive environment and good care practices that embrace a person's needs, strengths and interests. What people cannot retain in memory, we need to put into their environment so the information is there for them when they need it. Environmental cues and supports that enable the person living with dementia to function to their highest possible level are as important as having curtains that match the lounges and bedspreads. Some might even say these cues are even more important!

These are not just cues that support orientation, independence and sense of self but also can be the triggers for self initiated activities. People cannot be engaged in a meaningful activity and wander, intrude or exhibit other behaviours of unmet need at the same time.

Research has found that individuals with late stage dementia living in residential care participated in activities for 10 or fewer minutes per day. A study in 1994 found residents spent up to 87% of their time in no activity

Montessori's five areas of the classroom, Practical life, Sensorial, Culture, Math & Language have been modified to address the unique needs and abilities of those living with dementia. Maria Montessori was able to design a world where the classroom was set up to support the goals and objectives of a developing child. When we use this same philosophy for dementia, we need to adjust our framework to think of the classroom not as a single room but as the total environment in which the person living with dementia engages. Therefore in dementia care we frame the five areas of the classroom into Classes of activities. The word activities is broadly defined to include roles, routines, all activities and environmental supports.

The four classes of Montessori activities modified for dementia are:
Practical Life (activities of daily living)

Sensorial

Cognitive

Cultural & Social Connections

When thinking about the four classes of activities we need to remember that Maria Montessori placed a great deal of emphasis on supporting the environment, thereby creating a world where children would be challenged at their own pace and at their own level of ability. This conviction of supporting the environment and challenging people at their own level of ability underpins all aspects of a Montessori for Dementia approach to care.

Applying Montessori principles is not just for residential aged care. Family members can play a role in the promotion of both activities that encourage independence and bring pleasure to roles that increase self esteem and sense of worth. Montessori is applicable to wherever persons living with dementia live. I would like to share with you the work of one of my colleagues, Pamela Aldridge from AASA.

It is also possible for persons living with dementia to continue to have a role in the community. An inter-generational program at one facility has recently commenced, another example of a model that is fluid and has the ability to continually change, always looking for new ways to engage and provide enjoyment.

My work with those organisations brave enough to change how they deliver care has meant that staff have had to turn everything they thought they knew about dementia on its head. It has meant challenging care practises and having the courage to change what they do. There have been some Wow moments along the way. A resident with advanced dementia learning to pour drinks for meals, a resident learning to feed himself again by repetition of fine motor skill activities, a person learning to set the table using a template.

It has not been easy and at times the reality of where we need to be has been overwhelming. The biggest barrier to changing the world for persons living with dementia are staff attitudes. We can achieve great things if we have passion and if we believe in the power of small changes.

Can you imagine a world where you walk down a hall and there are signs and cue cards that tell you where you are and what is about to happen. Can you imagine a place where everybody wears name

place where the toilet and your bedroom are clearly signed. Where activities are everywhere for the partaking.

Everyday there is a reason to get out of bed, jobs to do and activities that bring great pleasure and fill the day. Activities that are meaningful, at your level of ability and where the sense of achievement when you complete them makes you feel good, special, and alive. A place where activities are designed for your level of ability and enable you to maintain the fine motor skills required for feeding yourself or shaving or dressing. A place where cue cards guide your activities making sure you never fail. Every day is a new day offering a dozen different reasons to get out of bed. Your future is promising and it feels good to be alive.

This is the world of a person living in a Montessori focused facility and the world I will continue to promote as I continue to spread to wonder of Montessori for aged care. There is such opportunity to change peoples life's. I leave you with a quote that guides me forward and I hope inspires others.

Thank You