Reconnecting with nature

Garuth Eliot Chalfont (right) considers the role of nature in people's lives and its implications for the design of residential care facilities.

There is evidence that maintaining a connection to nature is beneficial to quality of life and well-being for people with dementia, but how well do residential care environments facilitate this benefit?

Architectural research is under way which explores the person's need and desire for nature in their life, as well as the ability of the built environment to provide it. My research at the University of Sheffield will produce design guidance as well as an assessment tool for comparing residential environments for their ability to provide for their residents this beneficial connection to the natural world.

A residential care environment is a complex setting in which many factors enable or challenge a person's ability to connect to nature: care and management practice, various aspects of the building and the location, the availability of nature and habitat, human involvement, assistive technology and the abilities of the residents themselves. A purpose-built tool called PLANET (Person, Location, Architecture, Nature, Energy & Technology) is being developed and is useful for highlighting differences between settings.

Interviews with residents, focus groups with formal and informal carers, and observations of day to day life in residential care homes in the north of England continue to inform the research by investigating qualitatively the aspects that PLANET quantifies.

Findings so far underscore the interdisciplinary nature of the work and the complex factors to be overcome by a person with dementia if they are to establish contact with the natural world. For instance, the concept of 'time frame identity' describes the period in life that the person with dementia 

Short reports: an opportunity to communicate research and findings to practitioners

The Journal of Dementia Care invites readers to contribute to a new section, Short Reports. Articles of around 400 words will offer readers the opportunity to read accounts of research, practice developments and service innovations. Articles should also summarise in two or three bullet points their main points as a 'signpost' for practice. The editor is keen to develop this forum as a means of bringing studies quickly to a wide audience. Please contact the editor to discuss ideas for this section, or send material to her at Hawker Publications.

• Readers are also invited to contribute to these research pages with reports and commentaries on newly published research studies from any profession involved in dementia care, and/or share or request information about research in progress. Contact the editor, Journal of Dementia Care, Hawker Publications, 2nd Floor, Culvert House, Culvert Road, London

ception of the building in which they are living.

A study participant identifies himself as a second aged student who has perception reinforced by institutional design, and of the building, the daily routine, communal meals and group activities. Importantly, they will act appropriately to the environment (resisting the instinct which prevents autonomous activity such as standing gazing out of the window and venturing outside. This is also begin to account for their extreme anguish some people feel at tea time when they wait for returning home.

The research also considered how people with dementia use nature as a tool for expressing their thoughts and emotions metaphorically: "like a bird on the lawn, not a long time. They don't let themselves do this. They are particularly skilled at expressing their emotions in the moment and expressing their love and laughter. Nature can play a role by enabling expression.

Ultimately, the research findings will be applied to dementia care environments, architecture and nature designed in harmony to support heart felt expression, create joy and lift the spirits. Comments or inquiries are welcome.

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