Dementia woes could be eased with fresh air

Garden design expert plans project to prevent more cases of brain condition developing

‘Dementia may be in store for us. Rather than taking our chances we can take charge right now’

“A few things happened when my attention was focused on people with dementia,” he said.

“The husband of one of my clients was diagnosed, and it became my passion. My mother also had dementia for years.”

He decided to study for a PhD in architecture at Sheffield University, graduating in 2006.

“A lot of gardens made for care homes were done at the last minute, and by the time the designer got involved it was too late, because the architect had already put the garden in the shade,” said Dr Chalfont, who began visiting Springwood, run by the Sheffield charity, during his studies.

“I looked at different areas around the home - what’s unusual about Sheffcare homes is that they have a lot of space.”

“Every doorway that goes outside is a potential space that can be used for people. I started planting flower beds so that instantly residents can go outside and there was something to engage with.”

“Put in a greenhouse and a shed which doubled the potential activities that people could be doing outside.”

Dr Chalfont said an equally important - but usually overlooked - factor was making sure residents could see the garden from inside the home.

“If you can’t see the garden you don’t know it exists, especially if you have memory loss.”

“I like to say that emotion is the ‘blu-tack’ of memory. If a resident goes out into the garden and it’s pleasant, then it sticks. The next day they might remember it. There are a lot of myths about dementia, even if you have it you can actually make new memories.”

The Dementia Beat Camp involves a simple programme of diet, exercise, ‘brain training’ and fresh air. Dr Chalfont hopes to develop it into a service that will accept GP referrals.

“It will help people avoid the disastrous journey of dementia, and it will save the NHS money,” he said.

“Dementia may be in store for us, especially as we retire. Rather than taking our chances or hoping for a cure, we can take charge right now.”

Next Tuesday, January 21, the doctor is giving a talk at Wortley Hall, covering his work and the new project. The event starts at 7.30pm, open to all. Visit www.chalfontdesign.com for details.
Dr Garuth Chalfont, whose firm Chalfont Design is based in Commonside, Sheffield, specialises in creating therapeutic environments for people with dementia.