

EXPERIENCES OF BEING

The benefit of drama,
music and dancing in
improving the wellbeing
of older people in
care homes

BJF
Beth Johnson
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A
anchor

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Foreword

This is a short report about an initiative that brings drama and creativity into the lives of older people in care homes, particularly those with dementia. It shows how participation in drama, with music and dance, can benefit them, with a powerful and positive effect. Drama can soothe and stimulate at the same time, bringing back memories from the past, helping to engage underused but still active areas of the brain, and sparking spontaneous and creative reactions, and a rewarding sense of ‘the experience of different ways of being’.

The Beth Johnson Foundation (BJF) and Anchor Homes have worked together on this project, united in our common, heartfelt commitment to finding solutions to the challenges and difficulties affecting the care of older people.

Our researcher, Reva Nandakumara, followed a series of dynamic drama workshops in care homes run by the Anchor Group, and recorded how they can enrich, both physically and mentally, the lives of residents – especially those with dementia.

We hope that organisations and individuals involved in the care of older people will use the conclusions and techniques that this report highlights to develop their own drama and arts based creative initiatives in a variety of settings.

For our part, we will continue to explore solutions and new ways of thinking to address some of the challenges that confront people as they get older, while at the same time recognising, and celebrating, the fact that age is not a barrier to having a joyous and creative life.

Colin Hann,
Executive Chair, BJF

Jane Ashcroft CBE,
Chief Executive, Anchor

Introduction

With dementia now the biggest cause of death in the UK – more than 850,000 people are living with the disease today – the need to find effective tools that can be used empathetically to enhance the quality of life of people who have the condition is more urgent than ever. Can creative techniques like drama and dance help significantly?

This report highlights the benefits of using drama and creative techniques with older people, in particular those with dementia. Over a period of six months, the Anchor Group piloted a series of dynamic drama workshops in 17 of their care homes with the intention that the techniques taught by a professional drama teacher, Sian Gainham, could become a sustainable part of the activities led by the care home staff to enrich – both mentally and physically – the lives of residents, particularly those with dementia.

What is dementia?

The word dementia describes a set of symptoms that may include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem solving or language. Dementia is caused when the brain is damaged by diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, or strokes.

Background

A national pandemic

The latest figures reveal that dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, has overtaken heart disease as the leading cause of death in England and Wales. Last year, more than 61,000 people died of dementia – 11.6 per cent of all recorded deaths. The Office for National Statistics says the change is largely due to the ageing population.

Research conducted by the Alzheimer's Society in 2014 for its report *Dementia UK: Update* predicted that there would be 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK by 2015 at a cost to the UK of £26 billion a year, and that by 2025 there will be one million people with dementia in the UK. Two-thirds of people with dementia are women.

Art, drama and creative techniques – a new approach for dementia care?

Therapeutic techniques to help people with dementia have used drama with the emphasis, not on performance, but on the experience. A playful and active approach, given the right conditions, can facilitate the process of emotional growth within a person and the development of trust, risk-taking and the experience of different ways of being. Approaches involving drama are not a means to cure dementia, but a method to alleviate the symptoms and to increase the quality of life of the person who has it.

The use of such creative techniques to help people living with dementia has begun to gain more credence over the last twenty-five years. Around the globe, various schemes have been, and are being, used to support people with dementia and enhance their quality of life. Described briefly below are two British examples:

‘Singing for the Brain’

Research shows that using the power of music, especially singing, to unlock memories and kick start the grey matter is an increasingly important feature of dementia care. It appears to reach parts of the damaged brain in ways other forms of communication cannot. Alzheimer’s Society UK has therefore devised ‘Singing for the Brain’: one-hour sessions where people with all levels of dementia can come together, enjoy music, and sing. These sessions are currently taking place all around the country and have received positive feedback from people with dementia, carers and family members.

Professor Paul Robertson, a concert violinist and academic who has made a study of music in dementia care and was involved in creating the ‘Singing for the Brain’ scheme, says, ‘We know that the auditory system of the brain is the first to fully function at 16 weeks, which means that you are musically receptive long before anything else. So it’s a case of first in, last out when it comes to a dementia-type breakdown of memory’. Speaking of a time when he played for a former church organist with advanced dementia, he recalls that, ‘She was at an advanced stage of dementia: no language, no recognition. Someone started singing a hymn and this woman sat down at the piano, found the right key and accompanied the singer in perfect order’.

‘Someone started singing a hymn and this woman sat down at the piano, found the right key and accompanied the singer in perfect order’

– Professor Paul Robertson



Drama teacher and workshop leader Sian Gainham leads an interactive song routine with care home residents.



Care home residents and staff embarking on one of the workshop sessions.

Weekly drama and dance sessions

One study in particular, carried out by Lepp *et al.* (2003)¹, has strong synergy with the pilot projects conducted at the Anchor care homes. The study involved weekly one-hour drama and dance sessions with twelve elderly people with moderate to severe dementia, alongside seven of their caregivers. The sessions went on for two months, and some time later the carers were interviewed by a researcher.

The results were largely positive – the carers said the sessions had enhanced communication and triggered memory for the patients, given patients the opportunity to share their knowledge and ability, and had a beneficial effect on the relationship between patients and carers. Knock-on effects of this shared ‘fun’ experience were that patients expressed themselves more openly, grew in self confidence and had increased interest in their surroundings.

Methodology

For the qualitative report, visits were made to three Anchor care homes – Glendale, Linwood and Greenacres – where drama workshops were being piloted. The research in this report was collected through in-depth interviews with nine care home staff members and Sian Gainham, the drama teacher facilitating the workshops. Additionally, data was taken from 20 questionnaires filled in by care home staff across the 17 Anchor care homes, and observations were made on three particular care home sessions.

¹ Lepp *et al.*, *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 12, Wiley, 2003

The workshops

Sian Gainham

Sian Gainham is a fully qualified teacher who has taught in both mainstream secondary schools and special needs schools for the past twelve years. She has a performing arts background and a BA honours degree in Performance Writing with Arts Management from Dartington College. She now provides bespoke 'creative' sessions for different charities and organisations.

Before Gainham began work on this project, she had worked in several environments, teaching different subjects to young adults with autism, most of whom had behaviours that were extremely challenging. She says, 'Working in this kind of environment makes you very aware of how knowledgeable you need to be about each individual pupil in order to ensure everyone's safety at all times. I spent a lot of time with the pupils, getting to know their likes and dislikes, their triggers and cues, their sensory and communication needs'.

Many of the people Gainham worked with had complex sensory needs so she had to provide a lot of non-verbal communication and to make sure that sonic, visual and textual activities were available to the pupils whenever they needed a sensory break. Sian believes there is a parallel between working with adults with autism and working with people living with dementia. She says, 'I have been able to use the skills that I drew on in my work with pupils with autism and transfer them to working with people with dementia, as I am discovering the many similarities that exist between these two groups'.

'I have been able to use the skills that I drew on in my work with pupils with autism and transfer them to working with people with dementia, as I am discovering the many similarities that exist between these two groups'

– Sian Gainham

During the past year she has also led drama sessions, working with several other, different groups of people: pupils with learning disabilities – in some cases profound and multiple learning disabilities – health issues, sight impairments, brain injuries, physical disabilities and dementia.

Developing the Workshops

The workshops were conceptualised by Gainham but crucially evolved through her experience working with more than 200 residents across the 17 care homes during the six-month pilot period. Summarising her vision on coming into the workshops, she said,

Props to stimulate participants' imaginations may include animal masks.



'Within my sessions, the main aim was for me to provide a space where the residents could spontaneously explore their creativity through movement, mime and sensory exploration of props'.

The professional drama teacher worked collaboratively with the staff at each care home, tapping into

their stellar insight on residents with dementia and combining their input with her own experience in the arts to shape the final techniques. The techniques that Gainham uses in her drama sessions are derived from activities she has used over her teaching career and from techniques she was taught herself.

As a drama teacher who has worked with a range of different groups of people, with different needs and challenges, Gainham has always believed that working together with the key workers who support each individual is really important in creating the most effective plan.

'In the past,' says Gainham, 'as a teacher, I have spent a lot of time communicating with other staff members, relatives, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, aroma therapists and music therapists. I truly value the need to do this, in order to have a holistic approach to meeting each individual person's needs.'

This process cemented the need in Gainham's mind to connect with the staff at each care home and incorporate their recommendations and advice on how to improve the drama sessions so that all the residents benefit fully from each session. The fact that Gainham has also worked as a carer for adults with learning disabilities has undoubtedly increased her understanding of the carer-resident relationship.

Therefore, developing a strong relationship with care home staff and including their insight into the workshops was of prime importance to Gainham: 'It was crucial for me to establish a good dialogue with staff so that from the word go we could look at how my sessions were going to work best within their care home'.

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– Sian Gainham

Gainham also highlighted the importance of there being no right or wrong response to the activities, saying, 'I wanted the residents to feel respected and valued whatever the responses they chose to give.'

Workshop Structure

The outline below of the structure and nature of the workshops is based on observations taken at sessions across three different care homes.

1. The workshops began with an icebreaker called ‘the Name Game’. In this activity residents were asked to share their name and use an action to describe themselves. After each additional introduction, the entire group would repeat the names and corresponding actions until the whole group had been included. For example:

- a. Name: **Joyce** Action: **Wave**
- b. Name: **Rita** Action: **Salute**

The second stage of this activity involved repeating the series of actions – but this time without the names – to the accompaniment of some upbeat music, making it more of a ‘charade’ routine. The primary aim was to warm the group up, and get them gently using their bodies as well as their minds as a means to be creative. The second aim was to gently exercise their memories; the repetition of the names and actions worked well in this regard. In this respect, the ‘routine’ element is particularly important in meeting the needs of people with dementia. It also enabled everyone to feel included – if a resident was sleeping, their action could be a ‘sleeping gesture’. Those with less movement could use a very subtle action, such as raising their eyebrows, while those who were agile could get up and twirl around the room.

‘This activity has the ability to soothe the residents more than most other activities’

– Care home staff member

One member of the care home staff commented that, ‘This activity has the ability to soothe the residents more than most other activities.’

2. The second activity involved role-playing the various activities we do during a day. During this activity, Gainham invited input from the residents, starting with basic tasks, such as, what we do when we wake up – ‘Have a shower’, ‘Comb our hair’. The group then moved on to more creative activities, such as what else we might do on a day out – ‘Go to the cinema’, ‘Eat popcorn’, ‘Go bowling’. These role plays were then put to music, which went with a new sequence of ‘commands’: – ‘Superman’, ‘Beep the horn’ – tapping into both fantasy and real memories.
3. The next activity in the session involved a series of short dance moves set to music, and included popular dances like the ‘Macarena’. At this point most residents had relaxed, and were enjoying the fun of it and the opportunity to feel the music, and dance freely. In some cases they were up on their feet, mirroring the movements or just dancing in their own ways.

Of this activity, Gainham said, ‘Although the residents were encouraged to follow the dance moves, freedom of expression in each resident was the main aim of this activity.’

4. With music still playing, Gainham went on to introduce a set of props: an eclectic mix of scarves, hats, over-sized glasses, wooden spoons, and maracas, which the residents could then choose, try on, and use as starting points for conversations, role plays and fun. The props acted as stimuli for the residents, with powerful and diverse reactions. There was also a lucky dip, where residents could pick a surprise piece of jewellery to try on from a sparkly bag.
5. The session ended with a 'goodbye' song, during which the props were collected and each resident was given a ribbon to wave or use in any way they choose to signify goodbye and thanks. The aim of this activity was to serve as a gentle indication that the props need to be returned and that the session was over. It was also an important way of giving each resident individual attention and value – as each resident received a personal thank you and goodbye from the group. With residents with advanced dementia, this was done in small groups, or individually. Gainham mirrored the movements that the residents were making with their ribbons to affirm and praise their individual responses.

The props acted as stimuli for residents, with powerful and diverse reactions.

A care home staff member commented that, 'This was a really good way to make everyone understand the session was over – even for those residents who were non-verbal.'



Care home residents try on hats and items from the props box.



Care home staff joining residents in the workshops.



A 'props box'.

Drama performance opportunities

In addition to the workshops, Gainham is also piloting 'performance' evenings at care homes, where residents who have attended a couple of drama workshops are able to share their creativity in the form of short performances in front of fellow residents and family members. Here Gainham describes the experience of watching a solo performance that took place at one of the care homes:

As I walked into the room I was struck by the way it had been transformed from a dayroom into a little theatre, with bunting, chairs, and food and drink – you could definitely feel that the energy was upbeat in the room. The main performer, a female resident in her eighties, was brilliant throughout – remembering dance routines and gestures that we had rehearsed with minimum prompting. She was also able to sing the words to all the songs that she knew. A lot of her family were there, so it was great to see them enjoying her performance. In fact, her great-grandson became fully involved in the performance, which was so wonderful and spontaneous – exactly what live theatre is all about! Also, one resident agreed, in an impromptu fashion, to take on the role of a masked animal in the performance, and even read a part of a poem. Part of the performance included the distribution of props used during songs, which invited everyone in the room to become fully engaged in the performance. Everyone seemed to be having fun, which was what it was all about.

At the end of the performance, food and drinks were served and the party atmosphere continued. There was a real community atmosphere, with all generations joining in the interactive performance. One visiting family member read part of a poem during the performance – which was brilliant and again spontaneous, fitting in with the general feel of the evening. The evening had a really inclusive interactive feel about it and was more like an event than just a performance.

'There was a real community atmosphere, with all generations joining in the interactive performance.'

– Sian Gainham

Staff Training

The one-hour workshops were followed by a feedback and training session, where Gainham went through each technique with staff from the care home. Here staff could not only raise any questions they had about the workshop techniques, they could also provide their own input and suggestions for modifications that could be made. In fact, it was staff members at one of the care homes who suggested that less of an emphasis should be placed on role plays and that, instead, the focus should be on more 'open' miming activity – as this was more inclusive for residents with a wide range of abilities and challenges, including advanced dementia and Parkinson's – residents whose ability to speak was limited. Similarly, taking on advice from one of the homes, Gainham modified the order of activities to bring the 'props' activity to the end of the session. Anchor staff also suggested that Gainham include more music in the sessions, drawing on their own experience of how music relaxes and stimulates residents.

Gainham explained that 'The structure of the sessions changed from care home to care home, according to advice from the staff concerning what worked best for their individual residents. On my return visits, we



were able to talk about which parts of the session could be broken down and used with residents in other parts of the care home, so that everyone could be involved.'

Gainham reiterated the importance of these feedback sessions, saying, 'I read several books to help me further understand some of the effects of dementia, but it was my conversations with care staff that I found the most helpful in improving and adapting my sessions.'

The feedback that staff can provide from their own knowledge of individual residents is vital.

'The structure of the sessions changed from care home to care home, according to advice from the staff concerning what worked best for their individual residents.'

– Sian Gainham

Findings

The findings are given in three categories:

1. Mental benefits of the creative activities for care home residents.
2. Physical benefits of the creative activities for care home residents.
3. Sustainability of the methods provided by Gainham at the various care homes.

Mental Benefits

The Name Game

In research into dementia conducted by psychologist Tim Kitwood, he outlines ways in which a person with dementia's sense of 'personhood' could be strengthened and why this is really important for their mental health. He goes as far as to say that the role of dementia care services is so important that it has the power to either strengthen or undermine an individual's sense of personhood.²

Kitwood says that good dementia care can strengthen the sense that people with dementia have of themselves as people of worth and value, and therefore has the effect of being psychotherapeutic. The 'Name Game' incorporates one of Kitwood's key recommendations: to ensure that each resident is 'recognised' and affirmed as a unique person. Additionally, the repetition of names and actions in this activity can help to stimulate the short-term memories of residents.

The use of music in the second part of the Name Game – as well as in other parts of the workshop – can also have positive effects on people with dementia, according to research by neurologist Oliver Sacks³. His research into the use of music suggests that music can evoke emotion even in patients with the most advanced stage of Alzheimer's. Furthermore, the triggering of those emotions can bring forth memories which, he says, result in people with dementia 'feeling alive' in a way that conversation no longer enables them to.

The Dance Mime Activity

The findings about this activity show that it may have an even greater effect than music on people with dementia. In research conducted by psychologist Linda Maguire⁴ it was found that, through associating music with every day activities, patients can develop a rhythm that helps them to recall the memory of that activity, improving cognitive ability over time.

2 Tim Kitwood, *Dementia Reconsidered*, Open University Press, 'Rethinking Ageing' Series, 1997

3 Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia, Tales of Music and the Brain*, Knopf, 2007

4 Maguire *et al.*, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, Blackwell Science, 2015

These points are particularly relevant to this activity, as it is entirely based around miming everyday movements, from brushing hair to having a shower in the morning.

Maguire goes on to say, 'Musical aptitude and music appreciation are two of the last remaining abilities in patients with Alzheimer's'. Because these two abilities remain long after other abilities have passed, music is an excellent way to reach beyond the disease and reach the person. 'When used appropriately, music can shift mood, manage stress-induced agitation, stimulate positive interactions, facilitate cognitive function and coordinate motor movements'.⁵.

The 'Props' Box

In his recommendations for maintaining and enhancing 'personhood', Kitwood emphasises the importance of maintaining identity through reminiscence work, as it allows access to past identity and hopefully some continuity. The 'Props Box' activity can act as a catalyst to stimulate memories from the residents' pasts. Several care home staff commented that this activity had led to conversations with residents about their lives, homes and families.

For example, one resident interpreted a yellow ribbon as 'blonde curly hair' that she had had when she was young. On several occasions residents have been observed trying on old ornate jewellery and smiling – saying nothing but perhaps recovering old memories. One resident chose a Turkish-style scarf and commented on how it reminded her of the clothes she had worn as a child growing up in Turkey.

Additionally, the props facilitate another of Kitwood's recommendations for enhancing 'personhood' – to give the person with dementia the chance to 'make a change' or 'negotiate.' By being given the opportunity to choose a prop from a diverse selection, each resident is given the chance to 'negotiate', which enhances their sense of self-worth and self-esteem by placing emphasis on their personal likes and dislikes, and gives them ownership of the task.

Joyce's story

Joyce is 96 years old and has dementia. She never joins in with others during activities, but spends all day in her room – even eating her meals there, alone. She does not have any family who visit her. The only activities she participates in are the one-to-one sessions, such as manicures and haircuts – which again take place in her room.

Since the drama workshop, the staff at Joyce's care home have started using some of its creative techniques, and believe that they have been particularly effective with her. The main activity coordinator now carries out a weekly one-to-one 'prop box' activity, using boxes of beads, pictures and other small items, as well as some gentle hand movements set to music – like the dance mime activity. The coordinator says that Joyce really enjoys these sessions and now has animated conversations about her life when she was young – memories triggered by the items in the prop box. The staff believe this has improved her confidence and self-esteem and that it breaks down the monotony of her day.

5 Alzheimer's Foundation of America, <https://www.alzfdn.org/EducationandCare/musictherapy.htm>



The use of masks as props encourages care home residents to interact and role-play with one another.

The props also facilitate ‘creation’, which is when the person with dementia is given the opportunity to do something completely spontaneous. While for some of the residents the props triggered old memories, others used them to ‘create’ fantasy role-plays and situations. One resident interpreted a set of wooden spoons as a phone and, along with a carer, had a conversation in which she was told she had won the lottery, and went on to talk about moving to Barbados with her winnings, and being by the beach listening to the sea in the breeze.

Another major benefit of the activities was the fact that none of them relies on speech or verbal communication. In the words of the American gerontologist M. Powell Lawton ‘As a person’s ability to control and describe their environment through the use of words decreases, so the importance of the environment itself in determining their behaviour increases.’⁶

Roger’s story

81-year-old Roger has Parkinson’s disease and has limited movement.

The care home staff have implemented some of the techniques from the drama workshop pilot session. Roger comes along to the sessions and gets involved with the name game and the dance mime activities. These have encouraged him to exercise, which he hasn’t done previously but is really important for his wellbeing. This has in turn improved his self-esteem and confidence. Even his family have noticed how this has had a positive impact on him.

6 Lawton, quoted by Cheston and Bender, *Understanding Dementia: The man with the worried eyes*, Jessica Kingsley, 1999

Physical Benefits

The Name Game, and the Dance Mime activities both indirectly encouraged residents to move physically – whether the activity was full blown dancing or subtle hand movements, or just the tapping of a toe. This has an important benefit, as many care home staff workers say that one of the biggest challenges they face is getting residents to exercise.

Much research has been done into the effects of exercise on people with dementia. In addition to cognitive impairment, people with dementia experience a decline in functional abilities, which puts them at greater risk of injury and makes them more dependent on caregivers assisting them with even the most basic day-to-day activities.

Several studies suggest that regular exercise can improve overall physical functioning and physical fitness, and that maintaining strong muscles and flexible joints can help people maintain independence for longer, as well as improve their ability to dress, clean, cook and perform other daily activities (which may be performed more effectively if someone is fitter or more supple). The indirect nature of exercise in the

Sophie's story

Sophie had only recently moved into the care home and was finding the transition hard, sadly expressing on a daily basis that she wanted to go home.

After attending a drama session run by one of the care home staff members, Sophie began dancing to the music and dressing up in the accessories from the 'prop box'. It was the first-time staff had seen her relaxed and not asking to go home for an entire hour since she had arrived there. They noticed this change in Sophie and incorporated more of the creative techniques into her daily routine, which they believe significantly helped her settle in to the home – to the point that she now enjoys being there.

'When it comes to physical activities, there are some residents who will just refuse to take part; but because Sian got them to move without them even realising it, they ended up exercising anyway.'

– Care home staff member

Name Game and the Dance Mime succeeded in engaging residents' participation in physical activities where more conventional exercise-driven activities would fail.

One member of the care home staff remarked, 'When it comes to physical activities, there are some residents who will just refuse to take part; but because Sian got them to move without them even realising it, they ended up exercising anyway, which is great.'

The dance mime game engaged the group physically – right across the spectrum of abilities. Those who were physically able got up from their seats and danced, while those who were less able stayed sitting and tapped their feet. One female resident aged 100 joined this activity by tapping

her hand gently, while another got up from his seat and mimed the motions of a range of sporting activities that he had enjoyed when younger – like swimming and bowling.

Another benefit of the physical miming activity, noted by several carers, was that it ‘relaxed’ the residents – particularly those who experienced ‘agitation’ and low moods. One activity coordinator commented, ‘One of my residents – who always gets up in a low mood and is reluctant to take part in any activity – actually had a smile on her face during the ‘miming’ activity – and even picked up some sunglasses during the props part of the session.’

Michael’s story

Michael is in his 80s and has trouble with movement; he is largely wheelchair bound. He attends all drama and creativity workshops and eagerly looks forward to them. The care home staff used Gainham’s activities, participating in the dance mimes with him, and have noticed a gradual improvement in the amount he is able to move his legs, compared with his ability before he used the techniques. They all feel that regular exercise has had an important impact on him.

One of the other benefits of the physical elements of the workshops is that they are conducted in a group, which encourages residents to interact with one another. Such interaction tends to decline as dementia progresses, and can lead to other negative effects such as low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and ultimately social isolation. One activity coordinator commented that in her experience, when residents with advanced dementia watch their fellow residents who are in the early stages of dementia, they are more likely to mirror them and participate in an activity than they are when they are just asked to by a care home staff member.

‘The dancing reminds me of when my husband was in the Navy – then we would go dancing every Saturday night at the Naval Club.’

– Care home resident

Several of the care home staff commented that the subtle inclusion of dance in the workshops had had a positive effect on residents – particularly those who danced when they were younger ‘They’ll be twirling around the floor – as though they’ve been transported back 50 years.’

One resident who had just moved into a care home a few weeks previously, after her husband’s death, said, ‘The dancing reminds me of when my husband was in the Navy – then we would go dancing every Saturday night at the Naval Club.’

Sustainability

Over the course of the two training sessions, Gainham was effectively able to train the Anchor care home staff members to be able to use the creative techniques confidently and independently at the homes. The carers’ in-depth knowledge of the residents’



The participation of staff is important in encouraging residents to get involved.

individual needs, likes and dislikes gave them an additional advantage when conducting the workshops. The trusting relationship that they have with residents also helps, and this became apparent in the pilot sessions: there was a marked increase in the participation of the residents when the care staff also participated. For example, during the Name Game when the carers got involved and were laughing and enjoying themselves, the residents were quicker to get involved than when they didn't. Gainham said, 'Having fun is also an essential part of the session! And it is important that staff have fun too. I noticed immediately that residents who saw care staff having fun laughed and joined in the sessions with the encouragement of those staff members'.

'I noticed immediately that residents who saw care staff having fun laughed and joined in the sessions.'

– Sian Gainham

The care staff are also sensitive to each resident's individual difficulties. For example, one resident had a tendency to become obsessive about jewellery, so staff advised Sian to not give her any jewellery in the lucky dip game. Another had a phobia about the colour red, so red ribbons were avoided in the 'goodbye' ribbon song.

The fact that the staff themselves had played a role in shaping the workshop techniques also gave them a sense of ownership and the confidence to make changes. As one staff member remarked, 'We felt like we were part of a team – it was great working with Sian.'

*'We felt like we were part of a team
– it was great working with Sian.'*

– Care home staff member

Since the pilot sessions, several of the care homes have been putting on sessions themselves, some for several months, and the feedback they have given is that the workshops have enhanced their activity portfolio and have enriched the lives of their residents. 'They have become an integral part of what we do with the residents now,' said one care home staff member.

The techniques are flexible, which means that they can be used as a full hour session with a group of ten to twelve people, or they can be used for individual activities with smaller groups, or even with individuals – especially the props activity.

The only requirements for the workshops are music and some inexpensive props, which makes them easy and economical to replicate.

Conclusions

The drama and creative workshops amount to a simple and effective way of enhancing the experience of care home residents and can easily become part of the selection of regular activities available at care homes. They are inexpensive and scalable and, while they may not reverse the course of the residents' dementia, they add some level of comfort and improve markedly their level of self-esteem and self-worth.

There are also benefits to the care home providers and the care home environment, as the staff feel more confident and feel part of a team, and the residents are more relaxed, less agitated and have better connections with their family, friends and the community. The workshops also fit with the Quality Care Commission's inspection criteria of homes 'providing high-quality care', which 'encourages learning and innovation'.

Referring back to the research conducted by Lepp *et al.*,⁷ the potential impact of the use of drama and creative techniques could be even greater than what was observed in this study, particularly bearing in mind that they have only been implemented in the Anchor care homes for just over six months. In the words of one of the care home staff, 'The effect of these techniques can be felt well beyond the one-hour workshop.'

Carers found that the sessions enhanced communication, giving residents the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience and talk about their lives, homes and communities. The structure of the sessions changed from care home to care home taking into account the staffs' knowledge of their residents and this gave them a sense of ownership and developed their confidence and understanding of the residents' needs.

*The Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia 2020*⁸ states that the government 'is working harder than ever to improve dementia care, to make England more understanding of dementia, to find out more about the condition and to find new treatments which delay onset, slow progression or even cure dementia'. The drama sessions can be used as an innovative model for all care homes, as the benefits reflect the government's statement that 'wellbeing and quality of life must be uppermost in the minds of those commissioning and providing services'.

Finally, regarding BJJ's work with Anchor, and next steps, we hope that the two-hour sessions described can be used as an innovative model for care homes throughout the UK. The 17 care homes where the sessions were piloted could also be usefully revisited, possibly after six months and then a year, to establish the longer term impact and value of these activities. It would also be advisable for Sian Gainham to revisit the pilot care homes after a period of time to give a refresher course and to introduce and train staff members in new techniques.

7 Lepp *et al.*, *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 12, Wiley, 2003

8 Department of Health, 2015



www.bjf.org.uk



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