

Extract from Churchill Fellowship Report 2012

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Silver Memories – addressing social isolation, depression, effects of dementia

What is Dementia?

The term 'dementia' describes the symptoms of a large group of diseases including Alzheimer's (the most commonly diagnosed form of dementia), vascular dementia (the second most commonly diagnosed form of dementia), Parkinson's disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, Fronto Temporal dementia and Lewy Body Dementia.

There are a variety of behavioural problems that frequently accompany the cognitive deterioration in dementia – irritability, withdrawal, depression, anxiety, fear, paranoia, aggression, delusions, hallucinations, wandering, pacing, agitation and sleeping problems. These conditions require additional supervision and in some instances, sedative-hypnotic drugs and restraints for the safety and manageability of the dementia sufferer (Cohen et al. 1993). Christine Kennard writing for About.com says that some drugs have been shown to actually increase disinterested behaviour and motor agitation.

The size of the problem of dementia

Dementia is a major issue in Australia and internationally. In Australia, it is expected that the incidence of dementia will double over the next twenty years. Glen Rees from Alzheimer's Australia writing in the Sydney Morning Herald on the 7th January 2012 wrote that dementia is the iceberg that will cripple Australia's health care system. He stated that there are 280,000 Australians with dementia and 1600 new cases are diagnosed each week. By the year 2050 more than 1 million Australians will be living with various forms of the disease. It already costs 6 billion dollars annually and will grow to be the third largest area of hospital and residential care by the year 2030.

Australia has one of the longest life expectancies in the world. So the problem of dementia will continue to grow in Australia. There are currently about 1.5 million people affected by dementia either as sufferers or carers. It is an enormous public health problem. Programs that assist in the management of dementia will help to ease the burden not just on the public health system, but on the carers of people afflicted with the disease.

Can music help manage these problems?

There is a growing body of evidence that says it can. As reported in Pacific Standard Magazine on the 9th July 2012, the Italian Psycho-geriatric Association recently reviewed 32 papers on music therapy and dementia published over the last decade and found a pattern of significant reductions in such symptoms as depression, delusion and hallucination. So, music therapists have been working with dementia sufferers for many years achieving significant results. I met with some of the leading researchers in music therapy worldwide to explore how I could apply their research findings to the Silver Memories radio service – the 24 hour a day nostalgia radio station started by radio station 4MBS Classic FM in Brisbane in 2007. Silver Memories was set up to address social isolation in aged care facilities. This special service broadcasts music from the 1920's to the 1950's, old time serials, musicals, popular old time ballads and sends birthday greetings to its elderly listeners. Silver Memories was designed to address the social isolation that many elderly people experience both in their own home or in an assisted facility. Research has shown that social isolation leads to depression which can lead to dementia and other issues.

Silver Memories has been operating in Brisbane for over seven years. It is an Australian innovation that is now available Australia wide via satellite.