

Soap Box

The use of dolls in dementia care



During a day-long observation in a care home in Ireland earlier this year, there was a man, 'Patrick' who appeared quite worried and was pacing along the hallways in the home looking for ways to get out. A member of staff approached him and they walked together for a bit to an area where there was a large silver cross pram parked. Patrick looked into the pram and his facial expression was transformed from anxious to happy and animated in seconds as he looked down at the doll. The member of staff gently picked up the doll and offered her to Patrick to hold. He took her in his arms very tenderly and competently (he was a father of eight children and many grandchildren). Patrick sat down with the doll cradled in his arms, and occasionally lifted her up in the air smiling and made silly faces and noises at her. At one point he started to sing her a beautiful lullaby, rocking her gently from side to side. For the entire period I observed him he was completely enraptured by the doll with all his anxieties disappeared as his entire focus was on caring for his baby.

Many readers are likely to have observed magic moments like these if they have introduced dolls in dementia care settings. Yet it still comes as a surprise to me that there are some care homes which are still resistant to introducing what they consider 'childish' things with people living with a dementia. I have even heard of some CQC inspectors who have challenged the use of dolls as recently as last year. I would go so far as to argue that it is actually negligent to NOT have dolls available to people living with a dementia and that they are as 'essential' to some individuals' wellbeing as good food and sleep are.

+ WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIONS?

The arguments against dolls seem to stem from people's concern to always treat older people as adults and not patronise or 'demean' them. Some families struggle with seeing their relative behaving in a way that doesn't 'fit' with how they expect their adult parent or spouse to be. From my experience, this seems to be particularly the case when, as in the above example, it is a man who is nurturing a doll, as it seems to surprise people more to see a man in this role. Where the resistance comes from family members, I think it is important for those of us working in the sector to take some time to explore the feelings behind why a relative is feeling uncomfortable. These feelings are very real and need to be acknowledged, but we also need to be very clear about the very positive benefits of the use of dolls and, where helpful, to provide some written material that explains these benefits.

There are a number of articles in the Journal of Dementia Care which could be used and referred to and one of the best explanations of the benefits is in an article written in 2001 by David Moore, who was then working at Merevale House in Warwickshire. (Moore, 2001) Moore explains the various therapeutic aspects of dolls which include:

- + Meeting the need for 'attachment'
- + The need for play
- + The need for a sense of purpose or role
- + A way of expressing feelings about self

+ THE NEED FOR ATTACHMENT

Very young children have attachment needs to help them feel secure as they grow and develop in the world. Often this attachment will be to an adult figure but sometimes there will also be an attachment object such as a cloth, a soother or favourite toy. There is an interesting body of work (Bere Miesen and others) which have explored attachment needs in dementia. Some get confused by this, explaining that people living with a dementia have 'returned to their childhood' which is not the case. However, they have possibly returned to a world which feels quite scary and unfamiliar, so there may well be 'attachment behaviours' which are similar to those expressed by a child. Contact with dolls can reduce anxieties and visibly provide comfort and security to people to help them feel 'safe'.

+ THE NEED FOR PLAY

There are many expectations on all of us as adults to suppress the playfulness we enjoy as a child, but the need for play is important for us all at whatever age! When verbal communication is damaged in dementia, play becomes a way of communicating in a different way. The psychologist Erikson explains this in relation to children; 'The child uses play to make up for defeats, sufferings and frustrations, especially those resulting from... limited use of language.' (Erikson, 1968) When interacting with a doll, people have obvious opportunities to be playful as Patrick was making noises, silly faces and singing in the above example.

+ THE NEED FOR A SENSE OF PURPOSE OR ROLE

Many of us who are parents will refer to this role as an important part of our identity. Caring for a doll gives a person a sense of usefulness, pride and responsibility. For those living with a dementia, the cognitive impairment may mean that, in their own reality, they are still at a stage in their life where they have young children. 'Having a doll can also rekindle all sorts of positive memories and emotions of loving and being loved and needed.' (Moore, 2001)

+ A WAY OF EXPRESSING FEELINGS ABOUT SELF

There are times when it appears that when a person is talking about their 'baby's' needs they may actually be saying something about how they are feeling. It is important for skilled dementia care workers to tune into these feelings. If a person says that their baby is upset or needs a cuddle, for example, it might be that the person themselves is saying that they would like someone to comfort them.

One of the major positives of dolls in dementia care is that they provide a way for staff or families to interact with people through talking about the doll. Experienced dementia care workers will join the reality of the person and talk about feeding the baby, helping the baby to sleep and commenting on the baby's clothes etc. Again some struggle with whether it is a good thing to 'go along with' what they perceive is the 'lie' when the doll isn't 'real'. At Dementia Care Matters, we would argue that it is the person's own 'truth' that we are validating, and that this is a very important dementia specialist skill.





+ SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER WHEN USING DOLLS

- The Dementia Care Matters model strongly advocates not mixing people living with a dementia at different stages in their experience. One of the reasons for this is because there will be people in the very early stages or without a dementia who may make negative comments when they see someone cradling or singing to a doll.
- Not everyone will benefit from a doll – have them available in a ‘nursery’ area in a room and see whether people go there to engage with them. If you offer someone a doll, observe their response very carefully. Most will make it very clear if they are not interested.
- Be aware that there can sometimes be conflicts resulting from people fighting over dolls! You may need to use some creative strategies to help with this and make sure you have more than one doll!
- Be careful using dolls with closed eyes or too realistic features like crying noises as this might cause distress.
- Some people might prefer a cuddly dog or other animal rather than a doll particularly if they are an animal lover.
- Try and be culturally sensitive – use black dolls if you are supporting older black people.
- Communicate with the whole team and with family members about the benefits of dolls for an individual and make sure that this is reviewed as part of the care planning process.

CONCLUSION

I hope that we will soon get to a situation where it is accepted good practice to have dolls available to people in all dementia care settings. People who are still sceptical about their benefits need to give some thought to what it is that they have misgivings about and watch for the response of people like Patrick if they need any convincing!

References:
Erikson, EH (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Norton, New York

Moore (2001) ‘It’s like a gold medal and it’s all mine – dolls in dementia care’, *Journal of Dementia Care*, Nov/Dec

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