INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE GETS CREATIVE EDGE ON DEMENTIA

By SUSAN McFADDEN

Opportunities for creative expression and experiencing the arts can enhance the lives of people with dementia and those who care for them. Dalia Gottlieb-Tanaka, organizer of the First International Conference on Creative Expression, Communication and Dementia, stated, “What we aimed to achieve for this conference was to establish an interdisciplinary forum where people representing all the visual and performing arts could come together and learn about the role of the arts in dementia care.”

More than 150 people representing a wide variety of professions came to Vancouver, British Columbia, in spring 2005 to exchange ideas about creativity and dementia. Art, music and recreation therapists, speech pathologists and psychologists, architects, neuroscientists and sociologists joined dancers, actors, painters, poets and musicians in two days of lively discussion about the transforming power of the arts for people with Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia.

INTERDISCIPLINARY

Participants who frequently attend conferences focusing only on their own areas of expertise repeatedly commented on how much they valued the interdisciplinary emphasis of this gathering. Emphasizing the importance of the interdisciplinary exchange at the conference, Gottlieb-Tanaka recalled being at numerous conferences developed for elders with dementia that “did not encourage all the creative-expression disciplines to get together.” A participant of the Vancouver conference called it a “fabulous opportunity to gain a better understanding of how to work as a team to meet our residents’ needs.”

In addition to sitting and listening to formal talks, conference-goers in Vancouver were able to experience the arts firsthand as presenters led them in singing, dancing and drumming. At one point, every person was given a rhythm instrument. Led by a therapeutic recreation specialist and a professional drum group facilitator, participants joyfully created rhythmic patterns of sound.

Several themes emerged from formal presentations and participants’ casual interaction. The arts, as well as programs that support and nurture creativity, give a sense of fulfillment, support the development of meaningful relationships and affirm the personhood of elders with dementia. Arts programs of all kinds can open pathways for growth in older people, as well as in those who work with them in long-term care settings, adult day centers and other venues.

Because opportunities for creative expression offer people with dementia ways of communicating feelings, they nourish and promote relationships. For example, one participant described the positive dynamic that developed when a group of people with dementia started to give feedback to one another about their paintings. Another told how a poetry program promoted more conversations among residents in a long-term care facility.

Several speakers emphasized the effects on staff when arts programs were introduced into their facilities. Lori Martin and Vicky Bach of Shalom Village in Hamilton, Ontario, described how staff became more creative in responding to residents’ needs. When one resident became upset every evening at five
o’clock because she wanted a nickel to ride the bus home to her mother, staff members, who had observed her in a letter-writing program, drew on insights they had gained from that creative activity. They developed instructions for staff to respond to the resident’s pleas for a nickel, advising their colleagues to say, “Oh, yes, your mother is the wisest woman in town. People really respect your mother.” This satisfied the resident and reduced her anxiety. Martin and Bach said they believe their letter-writing program made facility staff more aware of how to connect with residents’ lives to improve care.

TO SUPPORT, NOT IMPROVE

Throughout the conference, participants emphasized that the arts should not be viewed merely as having functional purposes; rather, the arts should be embraced because of their intrinsic value and affirmation of the human spirit. Music therapist Melissa Jessop of Elmira, Ontario, stated, “The goal is not to improve but to support a person with dementia.” She also noted that some people “have misconceptions about music therapy with older people, assuming they all like music. They don’t.”

Although music can provide a significant pathway to self-actualization, it is only one of many forms of creative expression. Other presenters described painting programs, poetry-writing sessions and ways of eliciting creativity through letter writing. Woven throughout the descriptions of various arts programs was the assertion that participants don’t need to “stay inside the lines.” That is, there are no set expectations for the kinds of creative expression people with dementia produce. For example, Maureen Murphy of the Margaret Fulton Adult Day Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia, suggested combining free-form painting with predrawn images to produce large, colorful collages.

Conference participants said they were acutely aware of how many programs for older adults insist on narrow definitions of therapy and who qualifies for it. With more attention being paid to the arts and the possibilities for life-quality enhancement through various forms of creative expression, public policy makers, institutional administrators and leaders of programs for people with dementia will need to revise their perspectives on the role of the arts in dementia care.

Also, participants expressed frustration with the rigid job descriptions at some facilities. People working in visual arts programs said that they saw much potential for collaborating with those offering programs in music, dance and poetry, but that such cooperation is discouraged in some organizations—especially those operating under strict regulations for jobs defined in labor-management agreements.

INSPIRATION

Margaret Crossley, associate professor of psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, was among those who shared stories of how valuing creative expression and incorporating the arts into dementia care inspired program innovations. Crossley and her graduate students, Shawnda Lantin, Lisa Lejbak and Patrick Corney, reported on their efforts to revise neuropsychological tests, as well as the assessment process. They asked a group of grandmothers from indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan to give them feedback about their clinic procedures. To their surprise, they said, they learned the importance of creativity, humor, color and natural images—all of which were absent from standardized neuropsychological tests and clinical interviews.

Now Crossley and her students talk with clients about their forms of creative expression. They also have patients bring examples of their work to appointments, and discuss their creative activities in the clinical interview. This practice relieves stress and adds enjoyment to a difficult, long day of testing, she said. In addition, Crossley and her students are revising standardized neuropsychological instruments. They have added color to one test of episodic memory, and have revised another test of language processing and semantic memory. They described how native peoples from northern Saskatchewan re-
sponded far more positively to one modified test. Instead of asking clinic patients to identify dull black-and-white drawings of pyramids and palm trees, Crossley’s team presented colorful pictures of grasshoppers and geese—and got a much more positive response to their culturally sensitive, far more attractive test.

Another theme that emerged from several conference presentations concerned the urgent need to plan for the future and develop ways of using technology to support creative expression by people with dementia. For example, the Dementia Advocacy and Support Network International, Mariposa, Calif., offers an online chatroom at www.dasninternational.org where people with dementia and other interested parties can communicate with one another.

Ellen Ryan, professor of gerontology at the McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies, Hamilton, Ontario, and her colleagues have conducted numerous studies of writing programs for people with dementia. Ryan said that these writers can use computers to “keep going back to edit and rewrite.” This process helps them avoid some of the problems they experience with vocal communication. Computers provide important environmental support for all types of creative expression and enjoyment of the arts, and interactive technologies can support social relationships, she said. Those attending the conference repeatedly stressed that arts programs are important not only for eliciting the gifts of individuals with dementia, but also for creating communities of people to share the joy and meaning that can be found in the arts.

ASSETS NOT DEFICITS

The conference reflected a growing recognition of the need to move away from a deficit orientation toward people with dementia to working with their assets and finding out what they can contribute to their own care. This process can be hastened when the public begins to see the profound ways people reveal themselves and comment on their worlds of experience through painting, poetry, storytelling, music, dance and other forms of creativity.

An additional message of this conference was emphasized by Gottlieb-Tanaka: The creations of people with dementia need to be displayed outside of long-term care facilities and senior centers. The public has much to learn by viewing expressions of what psychologist Viktor Frankl called the defiant power of the human spirit, as it is created by people with dementia.

Susan McFadden chairs the Department of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.