

Jefferson House residents benefit from doctoral student's research

On a cold winter evening, an 87-year-old resident of Jefferson House did not want to change from her day clothes into her flannel nightgown. Without success, the nursing assistant tried to coax and reassure the woman that she would be more comfortable while sleeping. It was a routine that the staff and this woman with early dementia repeated every night.

However, this particular incident would end peacefully and successfully all because of a photograph of a happy baby that was placed in the resident's hands. Almost immediately, her agitation stopped and she smiled as she gazed at the image.

This cheerful photo was proving to be the most popular with residents, according to two students conducting doctoral research. During a three-week time period, Wei-Ying Chou and Yu-Ching Chang, students at University of Cambridge in England, worked every day at Jefferson House to calculate the effectiveness of photos to calm agitated or restless residents.

The collaboration came about when Chou contacted Christine Waszynski, MS, RN, GNP-C, a geriatric nurse practitioner at Hartford Hospital, who had co-authored an American Journal of Nursing article about decreasing patient agitation using therapeutic activities. Chou, an engineering design student who is pursuing her doctorate in health care design, was interested in exploring the feasibility of using emotion-elicited products to manage dementia patients' agitated behaviors.

Waszynski, who said she was intrigued by the concept, coordinated the research studies at Jefferson House, a department of Hartford Hospital, in Newington and Duncaster retirement community in Bloomfield. Families welcomed the idea that their loved one could benefit from the research that may eventually be used to help others. Criteria were mild- to moderate-stage Alzheimer's or related dementia, no visual or hearing impairment, and exhibiting occasional unsettled behavior.

Chou and Chang, who are from Taiwan and met in college, came to the United States at the end of September. In preparation, Chou selected 30 photos that were being used in a separate study, 10 each associated with excitement, happiness and relaxation, featuring scenes of nature, puppies and fireworks among others.

Waszynski, Robyn Beaulieu, RN, DNS, Jefferson House director of nursing services, and Susan Vinal, Jefferson House executive director, educated staff about the research. After arriving, the two students took the time to get to know the 18 residents involved in the study there. The photos inspired conversation and elicited memories.

Later on, when a participant was agitated or disoriented, a staff member and the two researchers would immediately go to the room and place the individual's favorite photograph in his or her hands. Often the person relaxed and regained a happier mood.

"It amazed us that a simple picture of a baby was able to easily distract their attention and calm them down immediately," Chou said. In other instances, the photo was ineffective. The responses were validated and recorded.

"When it worked, it worked well. Sometimes it was just a short distraction, other times it was enough to completely redirect them," Beaulieu said. "It was the engagement that we need to develop and focus on to improve the quality of our residents' lives." The exercise also benefited staff. "It also was a live example for the CNAs of something that they could do that was simple but effective," she said.

Waszynski said she was glad she could arrange the doctoral research, and found it beneficial to residents and staff. "This research into non-pharmacological interventions to improve the quality of life and person-centered care for persons suffering from dementia is very important. This research has provided some evidence for a practical intervention which can be tried with nursing home residents to decrease levels of agitation and can serve as the basis for many more studies on this topic." She plans to stay in touch with both students and follow Chou's doctoral studies.

"The experience is the most precious thing I can take from this research study," Chou said as she and Chang left Jefferson House on their last day. Several residents still treasure their photos.



Christine Waszynski, a geriatric nurse practitioner at Hartford Hospital, center, discusses photos used in a doctoral research study at Jefferson House in Newington with students Yu-Ching Chang, left, and Wei-Ying Chou, right.