Benefits of music for people with dementia

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Research has suggested that music aids memory function, increases social interaction in people with dementia, improves verbal and non-verbal communication and restores a sense of identity (Cuddy and Duffin, 2005). We decided to explore the effect of personalised music on people with dementia in our trust.

Nottingham University Hospitals Trust is the first in England to pilot a project called Playlist for Life. The scheme originated in Scotland in 2013 after Sally Magnusson noticed how listening to personalised music benefitted her mother, who had Alzheimer’s. She went on to set up the charity Playlist for Life, which is currently successfully rolled out across Scotland (www.playlistforlife.org.uk).

The project
Our six-month project was piloted on a busy ward for older people at Nottingham University Hospitals Trust. We aimed to evaluate the benefits of a personalised playlist for patients with dementia in an acute hospital. The project was funded by Nottingham University Hospital Better for You and Hospital Charity, and carried out between February and August 2015. Inclusion criteria were:

> Patients with a diagnosis of a dementia;
> Likely length of stay of 5-10 days.

Patients were informed of the project and were asked to list songs that were personal to them and they would enjoy listening to. If they were not able, carers/family were encouraged to create a playlist on the patients’ behalf. These playlists were then created using iTunes, put on iPod Shuffles and given to the patients free of charge. Twelve patients were included in the evaluation.

Quantitative evaluation
An observation tool was created to monitor the patients’ mood, engagement, responses and communication before, during and after listening to their playlists, and was completed by the project leads. Fig 1 demonstrates an improvement in mood and engagement for all patients during the music and a sustained effect after the music for 10 patients.

Qualitative feedback
It was satisfying to witness the patients’ experience of engaging with their playlists. One female patient, who had been withdrawn and disorientated, began singing loudly and then announced to patients in the bay that she had been listening to her music. She felt that her iPod was so precious that she had wrapped it in her underwear in the bottom of a bag.

Another patient was observed sitting in her chair, she appeared content but had not been engaging in any activity or conversation and spent her time staring straight ahead at an empty bed. On being given her playlist, she became animated and engaged, commenting: “That’s exactly what this place needs.”

Future plans
Personalised music not only improves social interaction of people with dementia, it can also reduce agitation. It may also have the potential to reduce falls as it was observed that patients are less inclined to try to get up from their chair as their attention was focused on their playlist. We are recruiting activity co-ordinators as part of our hospital falls team, who will all use Playlist for Life in their daily work.

Playlist for Life is a truly patient-centred, deliverable approach to dementia care in an acute setting. It provides meaningful occupation for patients, helping to reduce the frustration, boredom and fear that many experience. NT

References