CultureCase

Art therapy makes dementia patients more alert and engaged

This research was conducted by **Jennifer Rusted, Linda Sheppard and Diane Waller** at the **University of Sussex, the University of Sheffield and Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK**

Summary

This paper reports an experiment designed to test the effectiveness of art therapy on older people with dementia. The study took place in Sussex, UK. The sessions involved a mix of drawing, painting, collage and sculpting. The study found that art therapy provided long-term benefits to the patient's 'mental alertness, sociability, physical and social engagement'.

This was the first randomised control study of its kind

Each of the 45 patients in the study was randomly assigned to either an art therapy group or a recreational group. The recreational groups were brought together for the same amount of time as the art therapy groups, with trained therapists and facilitators, but they did not engage in any formal occupational therapy or art or craft activity.

All of the groups met for one hour a week for 40 weeks. A range of well-validated tests was conducted on all of the patients (tests were administered by the therapists and facilitators). They tested factors encompassing mood, cognition, attitude and behaviour. Tests occurred at the start, end, and at two other points midway through the 40 week period. They were repeated one month and three months after the programme. The impact of the sessions on individual's ability, mood, behaviour and attitude were recorded at the end of each session.

The results were encouraging

The authors say that the study provides ‘clear evidence of positive and durable benefits to aspects of mental alertness, sociability, physical and social engagement in clients with moderate and severe dementia’. The contrast group taking part in recreational activity saw increases in responsiveness but this was not maintained over time.

A few things to keep in mind

The study relied on data collected from therapists and facilitators, rather than the patients themselves. By the end of the study, there were complete data for only 21 patients. The rest had dropped out of the study (largely through death, ill-health or a change in their healthcare provision).

Keywords

UK **dementia** **experiment** **art** **randomised control trial** **elderly** **art therapy**

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Author email	**J.Rusted@sussex.ac.uk**

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