

# Managing dementia through object handling in museums

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This research was conducted by **Paul M. Camic, Sabina Hulbert and Jeremy Kimmel** at **Canterbury Christ Church University, UK**

## Summary

The importance of subjective health and wellbeing for individuals with dementia is often overlooked in favour of a highly medicalised approach to care. Dementia management presents a significant societal challenge worldwide. The authors of this study propose that the heritage sector could have a role to play and investigated the impact of interaction with museum objects on the wellbeing of people with dementia. The object handling sessions led to improved wellbeing for all participants. The cultural sector may represent an untapped resource to improve wellbeing.

## Handling museum objects may have both social and educational benefits

A total of 80 men and women with mild to moderate dementia took part in small group sessions of approximately one hour, during which they had the opportunity to handle and discuss unusual, diverse and unfamiliar objects from Tunbridge Wells Museum's collection. The sessions' focus was not triggering memory but rather to stimulate discussions about participants' feelings and opinions related to the objects. All participants completed a simple wellbeing scale before and after the session. Consistent improvements were seen in all aspects of wellbeing across men and women, with slightly greater effects in those with mild dementia and younger individuals.

Participants with moderate, rather than mild, cognitive impairment required somewhat more encouragement to handle and discuss the objects, though this did not prevent them gaining benefit from the sessions. The authors suggest

that providing a larger number of objects with which to interact might have provided even greater opportunity for visual and tactile interaction.

## Museum staff are already experts at communicating their collections

With further training these skills could be applied to benefit people with dementia and their carers more widely, with the additional advantage that such interactions take place away from medicalised clinical settings. Interaction with museum objects, along with a range of other cultural activities, may provide a powerful addition to the resources available for community health promotion.

This summary is by **Vicky MacBean, King's Knowledge Exchange Associate**

### Keywords

UK wellbeing experiment dementia museum

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