

Renewed hope for families managing dementia

The Prince Charles Hospital's (TPCH) Cognitive Assessment and Management (CAM) Unit is giving many families renewed hope in meeting the challenges of caring for a loved one with behaviour changes associated with dementia.

Dementia is a progressive disease. The effects on the individual can vary, but in most cases there is a gradual deterioration of short-term memory. Those affected may still be able to remember how to do things and frequently resort to activities they performed in the past and continue to enjoy them.

TPCH's Medical Director of Geriatric Medicine and Rehabilitation, Dr Keren Harvey, said the condition can result in significant changes in a person's behaviour and ability to communicate their needs effectively.

Skills in communication, decision making and judgment may be lost, and the person may become frustrated or physically put themselves or their loved ones at risk.

"With progressive deterioration, the care of people with these symptoms can become very difficult for families," Dr Harvey said.

The CAM Unit is staffed by doctors, nurses and allied health professionals and employs a range of unique diversional strategies to help manage and calm behaviours of individuals with complex dementia.

"The unit provides a team model where the person is the central member of the team. The emphasis is on quality care provision for people living with complex dementia – promoting independence and quality of life, supporting them and their families and providing relevant information and education tailored to their individual needs to enable informed discussion and decision making."

Dr Harvey said the provision of practical activities is important for this group of patients.

"The unit fosters an enriched physical environment to appeal to the patient's senses. It has adopted a home-like setting using items such as a common dining area, music, piano, and books."

The unit also accesses support from visiting families and external agencies to facilitate best patient care to meet the person's needs.

"Our goal is to develop strategies for individual clients that can help support the individual and their caregivers manage the behaviour changes associated with dementia," Dr Harvey said.

"It's also about preparing families for how they can continue to care for their loved one at home using the strategies we employ in the unit.

"The reality is many families are faced with the quandary of whether they can continue caring for their loved one at home.

"Our responsibility is to work out whether an individual with dementia can be managed at home with the support of their family, or whether residential aged care may be a better option.

"In many cases, through our program, many families learn that they can continue to provide care at home with additional support services and opportunity for assistance when needed.

"The program also aims to assist families in future planning for their ongoing needs so that the person with dementia and their families do not reach crisis point, and have the opportunity to make informed decisions.

"This gives families a great sense of relief that they can safely and effectively manage their loved ones at home, but that they are not alone and there is always access to support if and when they need it," Dr Harvey said.





There are more than
342,800
Australians living
with dementia

An estimated
1.2 million
people are involved
in the care of a person
with dementia

Dementia is the single
greatest cause of
disability in older
Australians aged
65 years +
and third leading
cause of disability
burden overall