

Developing supportive design for people with dementia: Overarching design principles

At least one in four people accessing acute hospital services are likely to have dementia and the number of people with dementia is expected to double over the next 30 years. The health departments of the four UK countries have produced dementia strategies with the aim of ensuring that people with dementia receive high-quality care in all health care settings. Hospital stays in particular are recognised to have detrimental effects on people with dementia. Yet our evidence from the Enhancing the Healing Environment programme is that relatively straightforward and inexpensive changes to the design and fabric of the care environment can have a considerable impact on the well-being of people with dementia, as well as improving staff morale and reducing overall costs. However, the Royal College of Psychiatrists Report of the National Audit of Dementia Care in General Hospitals 2011 suggested that most hospitals had yet to implement such changes. These design principles are offered as practical resource to help health care organisations develop dementia-friendly health care environments.

How to use these principles

The overarching design principles are presented as a wheel with five domains grouped around the desired outcomes for people with dementia in ward environments. These are: easing decision making; reducing agitation and distress; encouraging independence and social interaction; promoting safety; and enabling activities of daily living.

Within each domain - Legibility, Orientation, Wayfinding, Familiarity and Meaningful Activity - are a series of elements that are known to support, encourage and enable people with dementia in unfamiliar buildings.

It is unlikely that all the elements could be addressed at the same time unless a new build or comprehensive refurbishment is being planned. However, many of the principles are simple and can be introduced with very little financial outlay and, based on the evidence from the EHE programme, will prove helpful in creating a more supportive physical environment for people with dementia and their carers. For example, it is possible to de-clutter areas and remove distracting notices to create clear sight lines without incurring any expenditure and a photography competition for staff might provide high quality local images that could be used to identify individual bed spaces.

Photographs and details of the individual EHE schemes can be found at www.kingsfund.org.uk/ehe and these can be used to illustrate many of the elements found in the wheel.

How the principles were developed

The design of the physical environment can significantly help in compensating for sensory loss and cognitive impairment as well as contributing to supporting independence.

The overarching design principles have been developed as a result of the EHE programme and bring together best practice in creating more supportive care environments for people with cognitive problems and dementia. They were drawn from a number of sources and were informed by research evidence.

The King's Fund is currently in the process of bringing together more detailed design guidance which will be disseminated via conferences and short programmes during 2012. We are also able to provide in-house programmes tailored to meet specific needs and are happy to help organisations assess how they can best develop more supportive design for people with dementia and support them in delivering dementia-friendly environments.

For further information visit www.kingsfund.org.uk/ehe

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