

Photographic memories:

Using technology to connect to patients with dementia

By **Monica Fleck**

For many people, a loved one's dementia diagnosis not only means a loss of shared memories, but also a decline in the experience of personal, meaningful conversation. At its most fundamental level, conversation brings people together and helps establish and develop relationships. A research study conducted by Western University and McCormick Dementia Research looked at how to preserve those relationships by connecting in a shared experience, and more specifically, enhancing the quality of conversation by accessing and sharing family photos using iPad technology.

"We were looking at ways we could bring that meaningful conversation back into the picture," says Kelsey Dynes, researcher and graduate of

Western's Health and Rehabilitation Sciences Program. "We wanted something that gave us more of a person-centred approach," she adds.

"People living with dementia and their caregivers, family, friends and health care professionals have struggled mightily to maintain personal connectedness despite the language and communication problems inherent in a dementia diagnosis," says Dr. Joseph Orange, Professor at Western's School of Communication Sciences and Disorders.

To achieve this connectedness, iPad technology was selected as the study tool for its innovation and ease of use. Participating family members were asked to collect 40 photos of their loved one to look at together. The photos were scanned to an iPad, which includes a software program to



Using tablet technology to share old family photos with someone who has dementia is a simple and effective way to enhance conversation and to help preserve communication skills.

add a grammatically simple sentence beneath each picture.

"The goal of person-centred communication includes recognizing and validating one's individuality. We wanted to identify the individual in a unique way and use those personal references in the context of conversation," says Dynes.

The use of personal photos offered many beneficial outcomes. "We saw more positive conversations emerge and an increase in the frequency of utterances, which commonly decrease in people with dementia. Not only did they give more specific comments that were less vague and more detailed, their recall ability was enhanced," she says.

"All of the participants in the study rated the iPad system as easy-to-use and helpful in maintaining close and more intimate communication and connections on a personal level," says Orange.

In addition, family members found that the experience of sharing the photos was beneficial for them as well. "They really appreciated taking the time to sit down with their loved one," says Dynes. "They enjoyed how meaningful the experience was."

"The findings from this study will assist the tremendously rapid advances in communication software and hardware applications for persons living with dementia. Maintaining person-centred communication is key to their optimal social inclusion, physical and mental health status, and overall health-related quality of life," says Orange.

According to Steven Crawford, CEO of McCormick Care Group, the study resonates with the basic need to enhance and maintain human connectedness. "We recognize that it's important to find ways for people with dementia to exercise their basic communication skills and capacities in order to prolong their use. We were pleased to be involved in a study of something so fundamentally important to a person's sense of self."

The main takeaway, according to Dynes, is that whether or not you use an iPad to do so, just the experience of sharing old photos with someone who has dementia is a good way to stimulate conversation, prolong verbal abilities, exercise memory recall and enjoy enhanced togetherness. **H**

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