

# Challenging Dementia: Breaking down the barriers



As a student dietitian keen to learn new skills and meet new people, Heather Morgan was delighted to be offered a place on the College of Medicine's annual summer school this year which focused on dementia and the challenges faced by patients, relatives and healthcare professionals in its management.

*waiting on  
image*

*By Heather Morgan (Postgraduate Nutrition and Dietetics student at the University of Chester)*

Dementia is the progressive deterioration of cognitive function, often resulting in memory loss, confusion and difficulties with speech and understanding; the most commonly diagnosed form of dementia is Alzheimer's Disease. With an estimated 30% of hospital inpatients and 800,000 people throughout the UK suffering from dementia<sup>2</sup>, it is something we all need to be aware of in day-to-day practice.

A wide range of students from nine different disciplines, including medicine, mental health nursing, occupational therapy and physiotherapy, attended the two-day multidisciplinary event. It was a unique opportunity to get to know and understand the role of other healthcare professionals involved in the care of patients with dementia.

The first day of the event consisted of talks from a variety of speakers, including consultants, academics, an occupational therapist, and a young man who had recently been diagnosed with early onset dementia and is now an Alzheimer's Society Ambassador.

One of the most inspirational talks came from Simona Florio, a lady who runs a Healthy Living Club in Lambeth for elderly residents; many of whom have dementia. Her passion for improving the wellbeing of people with dementia through group activities such as singing and dancing was incredible, and a video clip of some of the sessions demonstrated what a positive effect the club had on those who attended. This talk really highlighted the importance of breaking down the barriers and stigma associated with dementia, through the promotion and development of dementia-friendly communities within society.

The second day was predominantly workshop-based. One of the workshops aimed to put us in the shoes of a dementia patient by simulating an environment of chaos and confusion while we performed tasks with limited means of communication, mobility and visibility. This exercise was a real eye-opener and it demonstrated how as healthcare professionals we need to tailor our approach when caring for someone with dementia.

Another workshop looked at the challenges faced by dementia

sufferers in society. The tool 'Whose shoes?' developed by Gill Phillips, was used to address various real-life scenarios, prompting interesting discussions about strategies to overcome these challenges. Two dementia patients were also present during the workshop and they gave us an insight into the obstacles that they face on a daily basis and their need for personalised support.

Exactly why some people develop dementia and others don't is still very much unclear. However, numerous risk factors have been identified, including: diabetes, high cholesterol, B-vitamin deficiencies, physical inactivity and raised blood pressure, suggesting that dietary and lifestyle interventions to reduce these risk factors may help to prevent the onset of dementia. One of the talks from the summer school focused on the latest research in the field of dementia and highlighted a recent clinical trial called VITACOG, which has shown a potential benefit of high doses of folate, B6 and B12 vitamins in slowing down the progression of the mild cognitive impairment that precedes dementia.<sup>3</sup>

The College of Medicine will be running another summer school in September 2014, with the theme to be announced this December, and I would really encourage dietetics students to attend. Applying for a place on the summer school involves a short application form which asks for a brief explanation of why you wish to attend. The summer school is also heavily subsidised by the College of Medicine, meaning that the cost of the entire two days, including accommodation and all meals, was only £65, which is excellent value. Whether the theme takes your fancy or not, the opportunity to meet and share experiences with students from other disciplines and backgrounds is just invaluable! ■

1. <http://www.collegeofmedicine.org.uk/summerschool2013>

2. Alzheimer's Society (2012)

3. Douaud, G., Refsum, H., de Jager, C. A., Jacoby, R., Nichols, T. E., Smith, S. M., & Smith, A. D. (2013). Preventing Alzheimer's disease-related gray matter atrophy by B-vitamin treatment. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 110(23), 9523-8. doi:10.1073/pnas.1301816110