

Improving dementia care in hospitals

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The research team

The University of Exeter [Evidence Synthesis Team](#) is an internationally recognised group of researchers and information specialists within the Medical School who collate, appraise and review evidence to inform important healthcare issues.

Executive summary

For people living with dementia being in hospital is challenging, and can be detrimental to their health:

- Hospitals increase the anxiety and disorientation people with dementia already feel by being somewhere unfamiliar;
- People with dementia can spend five to seven times longer than other over 65s in hospitals, experiencing more falls and new infections than their peers¹;
- Excess costs relating to increased length of stay for persons with dementia is estimated to exceed £80million²;
- In a survey of hospital care, one in two carers perceived hospital had a negative effect on the person's dementia symptoms, such as increased confusion and less independence ¹;

Evidence from over 80 studies shows care that places a focus on the mental needs as well as physical needs of the individual can really help³. However, the task and routine focussed nature of hospital life does not support the delivery of such care.

Hospitals need to embed policies that support staff in understanding dementia and allow for providing more personalised care where needed. Solutions that can help address this include:

- increasing workforce capacity;
- education and training for all hospital staff in understanding dementia;
- extending visiting hours for family members;
- creating physical environments that support familiarisation (such as encouraging personal items at the bedside and promoting clear signage);
- provision of space for social interactions and for sharing information.

Initiatives such as the National Dementia Action Alliance Dementia-Friendly Hospital charter, and John's Campaign (allowing carers the right to stay in hospital with people with dementia) and the Alzheimer's Society *This is Me* help address these issues, and have been accepted and widely adopted by acute hospitals across the UK. Further policies needed to support consistent systemic change are:

- investment in dementia training for all hospital staff;
- the incorporation of dementia-friendly environments within hospitals;
- rewards for healthcare staff who become dementia champions (staff members that have a special interest in promoting good dementia care).

Context

With the numbers of people with dementia expected to double in the next 30 years and predicted costs likely to treble to over £50 billion, we are facing one of the biggest global health and social care challenges⁴. Around 40% of patients over 70 who are admitted to hospital have dementia⁵, and at any one time around a quarter of hospital beds are occupied by people living with the condition⁶.

The NHS Long Term Plan, published on 7 January 2019, commits the NHS in England to improving the care provided to people with dementia and their carers in hospitals and at home⁵. The Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia 2020 was clear and unequivocal: aiming to make England the best country in the world for dementia care⁴.

Healthcare workers are under enormous pressure and may feel they lack the time and training required, causing burnout and sickness absence. Workforce shortage is a recognised issue within hospitals, having a direct impact on patient care and staff experience. With [>38,000 NHS nursing vacancies](#), urgent action is required to avoid a vicious cycle of growing shortages and declining quality.

Research aims

We explored what research says about:

- What is it like for people living with dementia and their families when they are in hospital?
- What is it like for staff who are caring for people with dementia in hospital?
- What can we do to improve the experience of care in hospital for people with dementia, their families and the staff who care for them?

Research findings

- Focussing care on the needs of the individual, recognising the importance of mental health as well as physical health, is the recommended best practice in hospitals but for people living with dementia this is not happening consistently.
- Healthcare workers feel unable to provide the care they need which has a detrimental effect on their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Simple measures such as making surroundings familiar, encouraging dementia awareness, and making spaces for communication can help

Key messages

- Staff need to be supported in providing person-centred care to people with dementia in hospitals, through training, improved capacity, and the encouragement of dementia champions
- Hospitals should be designed to accommodate the needs of people with dementia, their families and the staff that care for them.
- Hospitals should include systems that allow communication about the person with dementia between staff and carers.

Policy implications and proposals

- Support policies that increase workforce capacity in hospitals e.g. see recommendations in the Kings Fund publication Closing the Gap⁷
- Invest in dementia training for all hospital staff
- Advocate for reward schemes that incentivise and support staff who become dementia champions
- Push initiatives such as John's Campaign, which advocates for family members to visit outside of strict visiting hours, at a national level as well as within individual trusts
- Encourage new hospitals at constituency level to include dementia friendly signage and facilities, and spaces for communication and activities for people with dementia

References and Further Reading

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