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Giving older people with dementia a voice

An innovative tool is helping aged care residents living with dementia to be heard, and making their end of life journey meaningful to them.

May 20-26 is Palliative Care Week, raising awareness and understanding about palliative care in the Australian community.

Not-for-profit aged and disability organisation Villa Maria Catholic Homes (VMCH) has seen some fantastic results for residents with dementia since using the ConneCTo screening tool this year.

Developed by national peak body Meaningful Ageing Australia, and based on the work of Dr. Julie Fletcher, ConneCTo is a flexible spiritual screening tool used by Pastoral Care practitioners at VMCH to measure what gives a person's life meaning and purpose by identifying their spiritual and social interests.

VMCH Pastoral Care Practitioner Sr. Lorraine Testa has made the ConneCTo tool more accessible for people living with dementia, by using images and behavioural observations.

Sr. Lorraine will present her innovation, along with Meaningful Ageing Australia CEO Ilsa Hampton, at the Spiritual Care Australia conference on May 7.

“What makes this tool so ground breaking is its person-centred focus. Now when older people enter aged care, along with their clinical and physical assessment, a screening is done on their spiritual needs and desires. Understanding people's likes and dislikes assists us to provide meaningful care not only as they transition into aged care, but during their stay and then at the end of their life. For example, if they like classical music, we make sure that's playing during period of palliative care, or if their primary focus is their family, we'll have photos of their loved ones around. It's a holistic approach to care, which is really exciting.”

Sr. Lorraine said using images was key to help identifying the interests of a person who may have lost their speech or reverted back to their native tongue.

“Just because someone can't talk doesn't mean they can't give you information. This tool is about connecting with them in an emotional way, and reading their body language. It's a fallacy to say people who have dementia will not be able to illicit a memory from an image or music.”

Sr. Lorraine said another aspect that made the tool so special was that it meant Pastoral Care was now being recognised as a point of relevance in people's lives.

A March 2018 study on 132 VMCH aged care residents by Australian Catholic University found:

- 96 per cent perceived that they received a high quality of care 'often' or 'all of the time' during their meetings with their Pastoral Care Practitioner
- 94 per cent felt their situation had been understood
- 99 per cent felt they were treated with dignity and respect.

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“We now have the evidence there to back up how important Pastoral Care is,” Sr. Lorraine said. “It’s also important to note that a lot of people associate Pastoral Care with religion, but that’s not the case. While Pastoral Care might identify the importance of religion in someone’s life, it also looks at so many other facets to what gives that person’s life meaning like their family, friends or hobbies.”

Sr. Lorraine said she was “honoured” to present at the conference and represent the 13 VMCH Pastoral Care Practitioners who are doing an amazing job”.

VMCH CEO Sonya Smart, who is also a Meaningful Ageing Australia Board Member, said she was proud to lead an organisation focussed on delivering high quality pastoral and spiritual care.

“Tools like ConnecTo allow us to engage and connect with what gives older people meaning in their lives. We’ve seen already some great outcomes for residents who have benefited from their needs and choices being acknowledged and met in a way that is respectful and meaningful, particularly when receiving of palliative care, which is so important to having a full life.”

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About Villa Maria Catholic Homes

Through our passion and commitment to everyday people, Villa Maria Catholic Homes (VMCH) works in partnership with people of all ages and abilities. From all faiths and backgrounds, to achieve their goals, remain connected to their community and maintain independence.

We’re a Catholic not-for-profit organisation, providing services to 7,600 people across Victoria. Ask anyone at VMCH and you’ll find we’re driven by wanting to achieve outcomes that enhance the lives of older Australians, people with disability, families and carers.

We have a long history in listening to what people want and need. By making sure we can deliver services to match those needs, we can offer greater choice and opportunity to our customers. We want to help build compassionate and sustainable communities, so everyone is included.

Today we offer services that cover affordable housing options, residential aged care, retirement living, home community and disability services and specialist education. We’re an agile organisation constantly improving how we do things.

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