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## I must do the post – using poetry for raising dementia awareness

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the use of a poem written by a care assistant as part of a dementia awareness course. The author of the poem went on to use the poem to help staff within the care home gain insight and to promote reflection and discussion about caring for the person living with dementia as part of a training programme. An evaluation of its use was also undertaken and staff reported that this poem was thought provoking, insightful and had helped them to reflect on how they work with people living with dementia.

### Introduction

As part of a dementia awareness course the poem was written in an attempt to assist staff in a care home gain an insight into the way people with dementia view their world. The poem was then used in a training programme to help carers see what they do from the residents' point of view and help them to reflect on their approach to care when working with people with dementia.

### Using a poem as a teaching tool

Collins<sup>1</sup> argues that poetry is an excellent tool that can encourage deep reflection that can arouse emotions and be more meaningful and personal than other forms of teaching. Simon and Hicks<sup>2</sup> also found that using poems can engage and empower individuals to learn in different ways. Furnam et al<sup>3</sup> notes how understanding the lived experience can help to design interventions that take into account the complexities of the people we work with. In an account by a student nurse Downton<sup>4</sup> she recalls how seeing a film version of the 'What do you see Nurses' poem had moved her and then she reported on how she found that she was able to relate this within her practice as a nurse. Motele<sup>5</sup> also reported on the same poem and how that had helped to emphasis the approach of 'person first and dementia second' for her. Other authors who have used the approach of poetry to help with the learning process have included Yeh<sup>6</sup> who included poetry as a basis of discussion and reported on how it acted as a window to understanding. Spear and Henshall<sup>7</sup>, Cowin<sup>8</sup> and Hatton and Smith<sup>9</sup> all reported on how poems can be used as tool for reflection that can demonstrate both personal and professional growth. Collins<sup>1</sup> also found that using poetry can provide the students with opportunities to make connections and highlight how they offer personal

connections that are not like any other written word. As Spear and Henshall<sup>7</sup> found they can also act as an external voice that encourages the students to venture into areas they may not have thought about before.

The following is the poem written by Terence C Tolputt as a teaching aid:

### I MUST DO THE POST

Day 1

I'm wide awake, I can't hear a sound  
Where am I? I must look around,  
I struggle and pant to put on my vest  
It's the wrong way round (I'm doing my best)  
I walk down the corridor some woman calls out  
"You go back to bed you silly old trout"  
"Its 5 in the morning go back to bed"  
But I've got to sort the post out- it goes through my head.

I'm awoken by a lady (I heard what she said)  
It's time to get up, and get out of bed.  
I'm prodded and pulled (I'm wanting to cry)  
My vest is turned round, my pants pulled up high.  
Sat on the toilet I'm washed on my face,  
But you've forgotten to wash- down there in that place.  
My hair now combed, my teeth are all clean  
But where am I going, what does this all mean?

The dining rooms full -people abound  
A lot of them here just walking around,  
"Sit down my dear, cornflakes or toast?"  
But all I can think of is – I must do the post.  
No one listens; I don't think they care,  
Who are they anyway? My son is not there.  
Breakfast is done I'm sat in a chair  
I'll sit here all day and pull out my hair.

Morning or night I really don't know  
All I want now, is simply to go  
A lady is swearing, she's driving me mad  
I get up to walk, but I stumble (I'm sad)  
I fall to the floor I'm feeling some pain,  
(Should I be quiet, or should I complain?)  
Is it my arm? Or is it my leg?  
I'm not quite sure, I'm hoisted to bed.

I've lost my dignity, it's all now but gone,  
Where am I going? Where am I from?  
My dinner is nice – now I must be fair,  
But it's not like home – with my son in his chair.  
A doctor now visits and says I'm just fine-  
I'm put in the chair for the passing of time.  
The post must be done, I will go ask my son  
I always know best, after all I'm his mum.

I'm put on the toilet stand up then sit down  
I'm not sure what to do, I'm wearing a frown.  
It's tea time I'm told- now I must go home  
I don't like it here (I'm feeling alone)  
I'm put on a clothes protector (I think it's a bib)  
The lady says its mine (I think it's a fib)  
Beans on toast or burger in a bun-  
This really doesn't sound like very much fun.

It's half past six, my nighties put on  
But it's still light, the day is not done.  
I say "close the curtains and lock the back door"  
Where is my son? (I'm not really sure)  
Who is the lady? Where is she from?  
She puts me to bed with cream on my bum  
The day is now over, I'm all now but done  
Oh I wish I was at home with my son

DAY 2  
It's beautiful morning not gloomy or grey  
A man pops his head round, and says "are you ok?"  
He's got a friendly face but, sounding quite bold  
Says "I'm a care assistant, here to help you" I'm told  
He holds my hand and says not to worry  
I'm not going to be in too much of a hurry.  
He takes his time and tells me a joke  
I think is funny (It's not bad for a bloke).

He asks me a question that he needs to know  
Washing upstairs and then down below?  
He gives me time to choose my own clothes  
And brush my own hair and wiggle my toes.  
He says the post was ready and it has been done  
Breakfast is waiting and now would I like some?  
I choose what I like I'm given in a cup  
well now then, things are really looking up.

I'm given the choice of what to do today  
Pottery class perhaps, working with clay  
A walk in the garden, well what can I say.  
Whatever I choose, he will show me the way  
The man is so friendly and very much fun  
He really reminds me of my only son.  
He's smiling and happy and helpful all day.  
Oh I do hope he doesn't soon go away.

Baked potato (the vegetables are swell)  
Tea times much better I'm feeling so well.

A snack for supper and a nice cup of tea  
The man is still her keeping me company.  
He's caring I'm sure – and it must be said  
I will be ready soon to lay down my head.  
My dignity now restored, I'm happy again,  
I DO HOPE TOMORROW WILL BE JUST THE SAME.  
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#### Evaluation of the poem.

Twenty care staff took part in using and evaluating the poem. All twenty were positive about the poem, that they were able to directly relate to the poem and that it had influenced their approach to care. Several students had included comments such as 'makes me think about people with dementia', 'what it must feel like' and 'food for thought' which is in line with Conwin<sup>8</sup> and Collins<sup>9</sup> studies where students were able to make personal connections. Others were able to respond with insight and noted that his was a 'true story' and how it had affected their practice as noted by Dowden<sup>4</sup>. Others specifically related to the care of the person with dementia and reminded them of 'how small things can make such a difference' as had been the case for Motele<sup>5</sup>.

Two students had commented on how they felt the poem was sexist, however using this in a discussion can help reflection and discussion into the complexities of care for the person with dementia and gender issues around carers as well as ethical complexities of caring for this group. As Milligan and Woodley<sup>10</sup> note poems can be a powerful vehicle to help us understand the illness and ethical issues in healthcare practices.

#### Conclusion

The degree of success of the use of the poem as a tool for raising awareness is, according to Milligan and Woodley<sup>10</sup>, if the students respond to it with empathy, rational awareness, understanding and compassion. This had come through clearly within the evaluations as the carers noted that the poem had indeed evoked empathy in them as carers and how it had raised their awareness of the needs of people with dementia when living within a care home.

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