

Meeting Centres in Australia

Australia's first Meeting Centres Support Program for people with dementia and their family members has now been running for just over two years. **Dragana Bozinovski** provides this update

The Meeting Centres Support Program (MCSP) in Australia is a person-centred, evidence-based, comprehensive and integrated program offering support to people with mild to moderate dementia and their family carers, enabling them to adjust and cope with the condition.

The program was developed and pioneered in the Netherlands by Professor Rose-Marie Droes from the VU University Medical Centre in Amsterdam. In 2017 our not-for-profit organisation 3Bridges Community in South East Sydney received Federal Government funding under the Dementia and Aged Care Services Research and Innovation Funding Scheme to develop, implement and evaluate the feasibility of the MCSP program between the start of August 2017 and the end of October 2018.

The evaluation was led by Professor Yun-Hee Jeon from the University of Sydney, with the final report presented to 3Bridges Community and the Department of Health in late 2019 (Jeon *et al* 2019).

The MCSP program

The MCSP program is underpinned by the theoretical framework of the Adaptation-Coping model (Droes *et al* 2017) which recognises that people with dementia and their carers have to deal with adaptive tasks such as coping with disabilities, changes in behaviour and mood and maintaining a positive self-image.

MCSP offers an integrated package of care for the person with dementia and for the family members in one setting. For the person with dementia or members of the MCSP, a social club or group is



Summer Hill Meeting Centre Support Program members, staff and volunteers visiting Wendy Whiteley's Secret Garden in Lavender Bay, Sydney in November 2019

organised for up to three days per week where they can participate in recreational, psychosocial and psychomotor therapy (Droes *et al* 2017). The program offers carers: psychoeducational meetings or information sessions every six weeks and discussion groups or carer support groups each fortnight in accordance with their needs.

The first 3Bridges Community MCSP group was held on 21 November 2017 with six members. Attendance ranged from two to five people daily. Two years on, the program is offered at two locations, one at Carss Park and the other at Summer Hill, Sydney. Both centres are well established and run at full capacity, accommodating a maximum of 14 people each day. Currently there are 47 active participants across the two sites with 11 participants diagnosed with young onset dementia (YOD).

Feedback from members and carers has been overwhelmingly positive, especially from people diagnosed with YOD and their carers. The practical engagement with activities, meal preparation and assisting older members with tasks seems to be supporting their need for purpose and meaning.

The pilot study

The MCSP Australian pilot study explored the experiences of people living with dementia and their carers participating in the program as well as evaluation of the feasibility of the MCSP delivery in an Australian context, and the processes involved in its preparation and implementation.

The report outlines the numerous challenges experienced by the 3Bridges implementation team in rolling out the program during the pilot, however it also

highlights that having experienced, trained, passionate and enthusiastic staff was instrumental in implementing the program and key to participants' satisfaction with the program.

The study found the quality of life and psychological wellbeing of people with dementia remained largely unchanged, while carers' self-rated health and sense of competence decreased significantly over the six-month trial period. However, in her report, Professor Jeon stressed the importance of interpreting the statistical results with caution due to the small sample size. In contrast to the quantitative findings, all carers interviewed expressed overwhelmingly positive views towards the program and were satisfied with the support they received.

The 3Bridges pilot project identified that 90% of participants had at least one comorbidity health issue as

well as dementia, which, along with the fact that 60% of carers were sole carers and 37% were caring for another family member, added extra burden to their caring role. This, along with the progressive deteriorating nature of dementia, contributed to a higher level of stress and lower feeling of competence for participating carers.

Professor Jeon highlighted that “a key factor of carers’ satisfaction with the MCSP was the skills, professionalism, patience, and compassion demonstrated by the staff and the way they communicated with carers”.

Carers also felt the MCSP “had a positive impact on several aspects of their relative’s life, including moods, social interactions, and sense of confidence”.

Conclusion

After marking the second birthday of the program in November 2019, we are reflecting not only on the importance of the MCSP for our community families but for 3Bridges as well. It has provided us with opportunities to grow and has helped us to identify dementia



Carss Park Meeting Centre Support Program (MCSP) group member David, who is living with young onset dementia, reads to children from the Carss Park Narani Child Care Centre. The reading program is a collaboration between 3Bridges MCSP and the preschool. Photos courtesy 3Bridges Community

as an important and emerging issue for our organisation.

3Bridges is aiming to become a Dementia Australia Dementia Friendly Organisation after successfully leading a few dementia-friendly community initiatives in the area.

We are currently engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse communities in South East Sydney to raise awareness and

provide community education on dementia as well as provide professional development to multicultural and ethno-specific community care staff.

Engaging with our local communities and providing opportunities to have open conversations about dementia, is the only way we can help destigmatise and address issues related to dementia and care of people living with dementia and their families. ■

The MCSP Australian pilot study report is available at <http://bit.ly/MCSP-report>.



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References

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