

Meeting Centres: an Australian trial

3Bridges Community is a not-for-profit organisation located in South East Sydney that provides a wide range of programs to support vulnerable people from early years to their older and more frail age. One of its main strategic directions is to reframe ageing in a way that challenges society's negative attitudes and enables older people, including people with dementia and their carers, to stay well at home and to connect with purpose to their community

In 2015, 3Bridges Community consulted with its service users and other aged care providers on the current deficiencies in service responses to people with mild to moderate dementia and their families. This confirmed the need to 'rethink' the services offered by 3Bridges Community and to shift to locally-based programs delivered in a non-clinical environment that reduces the stigma of dementia while offering person-centred programs for people in the early stages of diagnosis and treatment.

In our search for an innovative program that produces best outcomes for people living with mild to moderate dementia and their family carers, we at 3Bridges found the Dutch-based Meeting Centres Support Program to be the answer to the fragmented support currently provided to people with dementia and their family carers in South East Sydney. Aligned with Australia's National Framework for Action on Dementia 2015-2019 (Department of Health 2015), the program reinforces the



Members of the Meeting Centres Support Program run by 3Bridges Community in South East Sydney. Photo: 3Bridges Community

rights of people with dementia to dignity, safety (physical, emotional and psychological), to have a choice, to be respected and valued, and to have quality of care for themselves and their family carers.

In 2017 we successfully applied for funding through the Department of Health's Dementia and Aged Care Services Fund to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing this European program in Australia, particularly in the Australian dementia care and community care sectors. We engaged Professor Yun-Hee Jeon from the University of Sydney to carry out the research. The trial period ran from November 2017 until the end of October 2018 with members attending the 3Bridges Community Carss Park Centre in Sydney. The report will be submitted to 3Bridges Community and the Department of Health by the end of February 2019.

This article outlines the Meeting Centres Support Program (MCSP), provides an overview of the Australian trial and an update on the program to date, including successes and challenges.

3Bridges Community was guided in its implementation

of the program by the designer of the concept and coordinator of the MEETINGDEM network (see box next page), Professor Rose-Marie Drees from the Department of Psychiatry, VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam.

The Meeting Centres Support Program

The MCSP is a person-centred, evidence-based, comprehensive and integrated program offering support to people with mild to moderate dementia and their family members, enabling them to adjust and cope with the condition.

It is underpinned by the theoretical framework of the Adaptation-Coping model (Drees *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. When the MCSP model was trialled in the UK the research team, led by Professor Dawn Brooker, chose to adjust the terminology used by the Dutch initiators into more suitable language using the overarching term 'Adjusting to Change' (Brooker *et al* 2017)

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report on the first Meeting Centres Support Program in Australia. Pioneered in the Netherlands, it offers an integrated program of recreational, social and creative activities for people with mild to moderate dementia, as well as advice and support for their families

which is more in line with the Australian terminology.

The Adaptation-Coping model recognises the changes or adjustments needed by the person and their family after diagnosis. These changes are conceptualised as adaptive tasks. How the person living with dementia and their carer deal with these tasks is based on their cognitive appraisal of them. Due to differences in personality, family history and the condition itself, these adaptive tasks will be appraised differently. For some people this will be a continuous progression and others will develop new coping strategies and behaviours (Brooker *et al* 2016).

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 organised for up to three days per week where they can participate in recreational, psychosocial and psychomotor therapy (Drees *et al* 2017).

For carers, there are psychoeducational meetings or information sessions every six weeks and discussion groups or carer support groups each fortnight and in accordance with carers' needs. For both the person living with dementia and the carer there are social activities, a weekly

consultation hour and regular monthly centre meetings where members, carers, staff and volunteers can share experiences, discuss any issues of concern, and suggest changes. Centre coordinators can provide assistance with My Aged Care, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) or other help that may be required.

MCSP is a person-centred approach tailored to each person's specific needs. An individual support plan is set up based on their experiences with adjusting to life after diagnosis. The plan is evaluated regularly and adjusted when needed (Droes *et al* 2017). Practical, emotional and social support strategies aimed at helping people to adjust to changes in their life are offered to the members and their carers.

MCSP integrates several support activities that have evidence in research or practice to be effective for people with dementia or their carers, such as cognitive stimulation, psychomotor therapy, music therapy, activity groups, family support, psychoeducation and counselling (Droes *et al* 2017). In accordance with the recommendations from the

Meeting Centres international network

The MEETINGDEM NETWORK project is aimed at implementing and evaluating the Meeting Centres Support Program (MCSP) for people with dementia and their carers living in the community.

It was launched in June 2018 in Amsterdam and consists of Meeting Centres in Australia, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK, and the universities and care and welfare organisations involved in developing or implementing these Meeting Centres.

Its aims are to: disseminate the Meeting Centres concept; exchange knowledge on effective post-diagnostic care and support for community-dwelling people with dementia and their carers via the website, newsletter and conferences; and promote international collaboration in applied research in post-diagnostic interventions in dementia. Details: www.meetingdem.eu

Clinical Practice Guidelines and Principles of Care for People with Dementia (NHMRC 2016) 3Bridges MCSP encourages its members to participate in one hour of physical exercise, healthy meal preparation including set-up and clean-up, and to do as much for themselves as possible while fostering their independence at the centre and in the community. Carers are welcome to stay and participate as active members or they can use the program as respite.

MCSP is offered at an

accessible location that facilitates social inclusiveness and community integration (Droes *et al* 2017). 3Bridges Community currently offers two locations, one at Carss Park and the other at Summer Hill, in Sydney. Both run at established community centres. This enables social participation with other non-MCSP staff and centre users including visitors to the community garden and parks, as well as different generational groups such as childcare and local primary and high schools. This inclusion is supported by 3Bridges Community being a dementia champion and actively engaged in raising dementia awareness in the local area and ensuring communities are developing a dementia-friendly attitude.

The MCSP team

MCSP is provided by a small, professional team and volunteers. The 3Bridges MCSP consists of five part-time professionals working across the two sites: two dementia care specialists, one social worker, one exercise physiologist and one diversional therapist. Professional staff are supported by volunteers and university students from social studies, creative music therapy or therapeutic recreation courses on practical

experience.

For Program Leader (and co-author here) Dragana Bozinovski, it was a dream come true to have the opportunity to be involved in implementing the MCSP soon after graduating with a Bachelor of Dementia Care from the University of Tasmania.

Despite the number of challenges initially encountered, the benefits and the positive impact for the members and their families were evident very soon after launching the first centre at Carss Park. The main ingredient for that was the camaraderie amongst the members. Meal preparation and having lunch together has become a focal point and many members are referring to the group as a 'new family'. This enables members to take these new friendships outside the centre and continue to support each other in the community.

MCSP Centre Coordinator Melissa has seen how the program supports the family as a whole. "We get to know the individuals better through our connection with their family and can help respond to issues as they arise before they become a crisis," she said. "The transparency of our monthly meetings where we talk openly about what is or is not working well with the program has really helped us to develop a comprehensive and responsive program that is always adapting to the group dynamics. Our members feel they come to the group to help others and this sense of purpose is so important to maintaining their emotional wellbeing."

As a recreational therapist at MCSP, Connie ensures that all the members get the opportunity to socialise, enjoy physical activities and express their uniqueness in a very friendly, inclusive environment. "It is a place where people with dementia and their carers regain the sense of belonging and enablement," she said.

MCSP exercise physiologist



Members of the Carss Park Meeting Centres Support Program enjoy a game of bowls during an outing. Photo: 3Bridges Community

Michael said the program has given him the opportunity to see the members improve in so many different ways. "Physically, the members are building muscle mass and bone density, are more confident with their gait and balance and in turn they walk through our front doors looking fitter and stronger. Noticing positive changes in members is the exact reason that inspires me to work in this field."

European research

Previous studies by Professor Droes have found that when compared to regular psychogeriatric day care, MCSP proved to have a more positive effect on mood, behaviour, self-esteem and delayed premature placement into long-term residential facilities (Droes *et al* 2004; Droes *et al* 2006). A majority of MCSP carers (82.1%) experienced less burden and more professional support (Droes *et al* 2006). Despite the increase in behavioural and psychiatric problems in the people with dementia, the emotional impact of these problems on the carers remained stable (Droes *et al* 2006). As a result of this support, significantly fewer people with dementia participating in MCSP were placed into long-term residential care (4%) during the period of seven months when compared with regular psychogeriatric day care (29%). At the same time, people with dementia attending MCSP participated in the community for a longer period before being placed into long-term residential care (Droes *et al* 2006).

Australian experiences

From September 2017 until the end of October 2018, 3Bridges Community received 106 referrals for the MCSP. Most of these came from the St George and Sutherland Dementia Advisory Service provided by Dementia Australia. A few came from My Aged Care, while some families self-

referred after learning about the program through local media.

Eligibility criteria set by the University of Sydney for participation in the MCSP trial were: official diagnosis of dementia – mild to moderate; have a carer living with them or provide support for a minimum of seven hours per week; have conversational English language; not be participating in any other structured dementia program; be willing to participate in a research study and provide consent; able to provide their own transport and not participate in any other current research. Most people who inquired either decided not to participate in the research or were ineligible, and as a result were referred to other community care programs.

There were a few other challenges for the implementation team that will be included in the final report, such as securing an appropriate venue that was available three days a week in which to deliver the program; establishing and maintaining the advisory group; and recruiting the required number of dyads for the control group.

Currently there are 42 active participants across the two sites. Feedback from members and carers has been overwhelmingly positive, especially from people diagnosed with Younger Onset Dementia (YOD) and their carers. The practical engagement with activities and meal preparation seems to be supporting their need for purpose and meaning. Some of the feedback below, from members and carers, reflects their experiences at MCSP:

"Since joining your dementia program I have seen profound changes in my husband's behaviour, temperament, communication skills and, most importantly, his ability to recall. Where he once needed encouragement to eat, shower, shop, socialise or engage in conversation he now needs much less motivation. He is up in the morning,

showered and dressed before 9am eagerly awaiting the time to leave home and join his new support community. The team at 3Bridges are more than a service providing activities, meals and fun, you have become his new family."

"My husband is doing okay. His doctor is happy with his progress. His memory has improved by two points. His anxiety level seems to be lower. He seems to enjoy attending 3Bridges with his mates on Tuesday."

"He thoroughly enjoyed the group, the company of the members, [and] the lovely friendly caring ladies who look after them so well. He felt that he is well respected, the lovely ladies have made him feel at home. He decided not to go to the Men's Shed on Mondays as he enjoys the MCSP a lot more. This also gives me, as his carer, a great peace of mind that he is happy at the centre so I can focus on my job and what I need to do. I expected that he would enjoy the program before he joined, but after a few days he enjoyed it more than I expected, which is such a relief for me."

Conclusion

The MCSP Australian pilot study finished at the end of October 2018 but the program is continuing at the Carss Park and Summer Hill centres. Summer Hill MCSP operates on a fee-for-service basis and the Carss Park program is funded by the Department of Health until the end of June 2019. However, due to the positive feedback from participants, 3Bridges Community will introduce a fee structure in 2019 at Carss Park to ensure existing and future participants can continue to attend beyond the funding period. ■

3Bridges won the 2018 ACSA NSW/ACT Aged Care Award for Innovation in Service or Design and was a finalist in the 2018 HESTA national aged care awards for its pilot of the Meeting Centres Support Program.

For more information on the 3Bridges Community MCSP program, visit <https://youtu.be/pzf7Baux11E>



■ Dragana Bozinovski (left) is the MCSP Program Leader, has a Bachelor of Dementia Care and provides counselling for people diagnosed with dementia, their carers and families; Amal Madani is Director of Reframing Ageing at 3Bridges Community where she leads community programs designed to support vulnerable people including people with dementia and their family carers. Contact her at: amal.madani@3bridges.org.au

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