Robotic Pet Therapy Workshop

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Purpose of the Project

This project was student-led and aimed to support the Seniors Health Strategic Clinical Network’s (SCN) mission which is “to make improvements in healthcare services and practices that enable Alberta seniors to optimize their health, well-being and independence” by facilitating the pursuit of knowledge and building capacity related to the three priority areas of the SCN (SCN, 2017, p. 7):

1. Aging Brain Care
2. Frailty, Resilience, Aging-Well: Late-life Transitions (FAILTI)
3. Anticipating an Aging Alberta

It is designed to train healthcare professionals along with caregivers in incorporating robotic pet therapy as a non-pharmacological technique when caring for people with dementia. It is a workshop that was designed with two simulations (both demonstrating very different characteristics of dementia) and having the learners enter each with their previous set of skills and introducing a robotic pet as an intervention. Learners were provided prior to simulation. When designing this workshop, the intent was to advocate for the necessary use of alternatives instead of medication. After doing some research and these simulations, it was found that these interventions were proven to show a better quality of life for persons with dementia. One piece of information that was important in the development of this workshop was the demonstration of different characteristics and teaching the learners the correct terminology. Research has shown that the use of the word “behaviours” when talking about symptoms of dementia create a negative stigma around it, so it is encouraged to use the word “characteristics of dementia” when talking about the symptoms specifically. It has been said that while people see it as the person acting out a behavior, it is actually a coping mechanism that is used to get through their day.

What is dementia?

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe a set of symptoms affecting brain function that are caused by neurodegenerative and vascular diseases or injuries. It is characterized by a decline in cognitive decline in cognitive abilities. These abilities include: memory, awareness if person, place, and time; language, basic math skills; judgment; and planning. Dementia can also affect mood and behavior. (A Dementia Strategy for Canada, 2019, p. 1).

Benefits of non-pharmacological techniques

Research shows that dementia can present itself in people with many different characteristics. Unfortunately, the lack of proper training around this characteristic can cause a stigma around dementia. While medications have proven to work for many diseases and disorders unfortunately it is not always the answer for this particular disease. Anti-psychotics are one of the main ones and while they have shown to be effective with acute “behaviours” they have shown otherwise in chronic. The use of anti- psychotics are being prescribed to people with dementia too often, without realizing the risk it has on an aging brain with dementia. The goal was to find alternatives that would benefit the person and the provider in a non-pharmacological way. Animal therapy has shown to improve moods and instills a sense of belonging, unfortunately the responsibility of having a “real” pet is quite much. Robotic pet therapy gives that opportunity for a person to have a pet with them and creates a social interaction with the pet and others. Non-pharmacological management encourages healthcare professionals and caregivers to see the person beyond their disease and treat people with dementia with empathy and dignity like every individual would like to be treated. It has been shown that when people with dementia are provided alternative ways to cope with the characteristics they are demonstrating, they are feeling heard and that their needs are being met which intern reduces the frequency of such feelings like agitation or depression, while increasing their quality of life.

Workshop Logistics

Importance of using Standardized Patient’s

The workshop focused on two approaches of alternating between groups to ensure all individuals had a chance to experience both simulations. Each simulation ran for maximum of 10 minutes or when the learning objectives were met within the simulation. After the simulation, a debrief took place for approximately 20-30 minutes. Participants were able to reflect on the simulation and/or what they observed. The workshop included 4 participants in each simulation, two participants were active in the simulation while the other remained in the debrief room to watch live as an active observer. The two active observers were given the task of looking for learning objectives. The active observer role was an important role in the simulation, as this captured how others work together and find ways to care for dementia residents. Different healthcare providers (HCP) have different approaches which creates a tremendous learning environment. The simulation utilized standardized patients (SPs) acting in the role of a dementia resident. The impact of the SPs role made a huge difference in the realism of the simulation. They were able to stay in character and provide an accurate day in the life of what residents with dementia can experience. The use of SPs was a necessity in the simulation when working with dementia residents who are non-verbal or just show a lack of social interactions. The demeanor and facial expressions played a key role for how they were feeling at the time. The participants were able to catch these expressions and non-verbal cues and find ways to assist. Simulation has proven to be effective in helping participants develop skills in a place where you feel safe. Using SPs in this workshop enhances the fidelity and could not have been duplicated or accomplished without.

Target Learners

- Instructors and Students in the health disciplines
- Family members/Caregivers
- Any healthcare professional that is wanting to learn a new approach to working with people with dementia; nurses, recreational therapists, healthcare aids, etc

Learning Objectives

- The learners will be able to recognize competing priorities of different health disciplines and encourage collaboration amongst each other.
- The learners will recognize and work with the non-pharmacological techniques that present in clients with dementia: word-finding, negative statements, rumbling, laughing, wandering, repetitive, agitation and aggression.
- The learners will work with the client by incorporating the robotic pet as an intervention and/or use as a social companion.
- The learners will implement person-centered care revolving around interactions with individualized components.

Learner Feedback

- “It is something that I will bring to my lab and students to give them food for thought and maybe a little bit of knowledge for caring for their dementia patients in clinical.”
- “Thank you for giving us the opportunity to expand our thinking.”
- “The use of the SPs was for purpose, it’s for a purpose.”
- “I would be strongly beneficial before the Health Care Aide 1st Supportive Living Course.”
- “Loved the “hands on simulations”
- “Well organized great team work.”

Recommendations Forward

- Offer the workshop to all healthcare providers and students that work in healthcare
- Offer family members the opportunity to work alongside their with resources
- Conduct research on the integration of robotic pets in clinical environment
- Use this workshop in conjunction with other learning activities to enhance participant’s knowledge of dementia care

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