

Regular Therapeutic Singing Sessions for Patients with Dementia Associated with 50% Reduction in Occurrences of Aggressive Behaviour

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The findings of a three month pilot study indicate that the regular provision of singing activities can have a significant impact on the well-being of patients living with dementia, and for those caring for them. A noted reduction in aggressive behaviour also demonstrates reduced levels of risk for patients, staff and relatives.

There are suggestions therefore from the pilot that regular therapeutic singing sessions could have the potential, in some instances, to replace psychotropic drugs, both in terms of enhancing mood, reducing anxiety / agitation and reducing incidents of challenging behaviour.

What is needed now is a more robust

research study to investigate the potential of engaged singing in dementia care settings.

Introduction

A number of studies have highlighted the beneficial role of music for people with dementia (Ref 1. Clark, Lipe and Bilbrey 1998) and currently there is much emphasis on identifying alternatives to psychotropic medication for those exhibiting distress and challenging behaviours in particular.

The objective of the pilot project by Kent and Medway NHS & Social Care Partnership Trust (KMPT) and the charity, Sing For Your Life, was to establish the feasibility and effects of regular therapeutic singing sessions for those people with dementia

requiring mental health continuing care i.e. those with the highest level of need, typically including unpredictable and challenging / disturbed behaviour.

The study was conducted on two wards, each with 20 patients, in one of KMPT's Continuing Care Units for people living with mental health conditions. Ward staff incorporated the use of engaged singing sessions into the clinical setting using a Silver Song Music Box provided by the charity.

The findings of the evaluation would determine the clinical and care cases for The Friends of Mental Health at KMPT to purchase or not Silver Song Music Boxes for on-going use after the trial period.

Objectives:

To establish the feasibility for ward staff to provide participatory singing sessions using the Music Box, on a regular basis, in these care settings

To identify the effects the Music Box sessions had on patients, staff and visiting relatives





To calculate whether the Music Box sessions made a difference to levels of reported ward incidents involving challenging behaviour towards other residents or staff.

Procedure:

Data detailing the number and types of incidents reported on the two case wards was obtained for the three month period preceding the pilot and for the three months of the pilot.

Staff on each ward had a training session, provided by a **Sing For Your Life Silver Song Club** facilitator. They were then supported initially by the music therapist attached to the wards.

Thereafter ward staff, including therapy assistants and healthcare workers, ran the engaged singing sessions themselves.

Staff were encouraged to use the **Silver Song Music** Boxes on a regular basis, particularly at times when high levels of challenging behaviour had been identified as most likely to occur.

Observations and record sheets were completed throughout the trial period and questionnaires and interviews conducted at the end of the pilot period to capture the

effects the Silver Song Music Box sessions had on the patients, staff and relatives visiting the wards.

Findings:

In summary, it was feasible for staff on one ward to incorporate music sessions regularly into the ward routine; the other ward used it occasionally. On both wards improvements in mood and social engagement were frequently noted for patients, relatives and staff.

Staff and relatives noted how the ward atmosphere changed and relatives were moved to see their often 'locked-in' family member enjoying themselves and remembering old songs. For some, the Music Box sessions enabled them to communicate in a way not seen for a long time.

When Music Box sessions occurred regularly, there was a significant reduction in the number of incidents related to challenging behaviour. This is of particular clinical relevance and indicates the potential role that such sessions can play in reducing levels of risk and associated improvements in patient wellbeing and staff moral.

More specifically the following was found:

- When used regularly, levels of challenging behaviour and aggression between patients were reduced during the trial period by more than 50%
- Physical incidents involving staff were reduced by 61%
- Patients were able to engage in the sessions in a variety of positive ways, irrespective of their physical, cognitive or language abilities
- Carers were able to learn more about their patients and as a result provide enriched Person Centred Care
- Patients were able to once again use skills and to reconnect with personal memories and hobbies
- There was a noticeable improvement in the mood and well being of the patients, staff and visitors to the ward
- The general ward atmosphere was enhanced
- Relatives reported significant improvements in relationships with those participating

Aggressive and challenging behaviour

For the duration of the pilot improvements in communication and engagement between staff and patients were reported on both wards. On ward A where the

Music Box was used regularly, the most noteworthy finding was the 50% reduction in the number of incidents of aggressive behaviour and 61% reduction in physical incidents towards staff.

These reductions did not occur on ward B where participatory signing was not regularly provided. Levels of incidents remained similar across both time periods on this ward.

This suggests that singing sessions have a beneficial impact and could be used proactively in such care environments, for the benefit of both patients and staff.

Improved Person Centred Care

The singing sessions enabled staff to learn more about their patients as individuals from their reactions to the music and the other group members. The singing, in many instances, helped patients to communicate and triggered personal memories and social involvement. As a result, staff were able to provide enriched Person Centred Care.

Inclusivity

Almost all patients on the ward participated at some point. However, the way in which they participated in the music sessions varied enormously, often dependent on their physical, communication and cognitive abilities and mood. Some sang with gusto, others danced, conducted, vocalised or moved their bodies to the music.

For others, their participation was less obvious, but nonetheless significant e.g. slight body movements, increased alertness, smiling and evidence of listening to or responding to the music or actions of others in the group.

Some stayed for the entire session, others dipped in and out. This reflects the broad applicability and acceptability of this kind of music session, which has clear advantages in a continuing care environment.

Enhanced mood

There was unanimous feedback about

the positive impact on mood for those participating in the music sessions, whether staff, patients or relatives. From analysing the pattern and timings of the reduction in incidents, it is thought likely that in addition to the "in the moment" positive experiences, regular Music Box sessions have a global impact on ward atmosphere, with resultant longer lasting benefits.

It is suggested that the positive interactions between patients and staff; carers and relatives afforded by these sessions may be the salient factor underpinning the improved ward atmosphere.

Singing as a potential alternative to pharmacological interventions

The mood enhancement and the reduction in incidents of aggressive behaviour suggest that engaged singing sessions can be considered as a positive alternative to pharmacological interventions. The music sessions were seen to draw passive and anxious individuals out of themselves, whilst having a calming effect on those who were more agitated or unsettled.

The pilot outcomes suggest that this potential should be explored considering the theoretically positive health benefits for patients and cost savings for the NHS.

Maintaining family bonds

Families were moved by the positive impact that the singing sessions had on their relatives. For many it provided an enjoyable way to spend time with a spouse, parent or relative who was less withdrawn and more communicative than usual. It provided a glimmer of the person they once were.

Family bonds are very important to us all; in dementia care services they should be particularly respected and supported. Singing sessions offer a meaningful format in which on-going relationships between husband and wife, parent and child could be fostered.

Conclusion

The summary conclusion of the pilot with Sing For Your Life is that the provision of regular engaged singing sessions can have

a very positive impact in dementia care settings. The Music Box sessions provided a significant impact, not just on patient well-being, but also on the happiness, security and welfare of staff and family members.

The participant feedback suggests that singing sessions can have a significant and positive global impact on "ward atmosphere" and improve the relationships between patients, carers and relatives as the result of this more ambient and communicative environment.

The Silver Song Music Box may have the potential, in some instances to replace psychotropic drugs, both in terms of enhancing mood, reducing anxiety / agitation and reducing incidents of challenging behaviour. What is needed now is a more robust research study to investigate the potential of engaged singing in dementia care settings.

Certainly this study, and the many other programmes looking at the arts in the management of dementia, suggests there is a valid case for approaches that use low cost "tools", such as engaged singing, delivered by non-arts professionals.

The use of music therapeutically is included in the 2NICE – SCIE Dementia clinical guidelines (2006), which states how music and dance should where possible, be used with people who have dementia and should always be considered for people with challenging behaviour, prior to the consideration of pharmacological treatments (unless severe distress is being caused).

This is further supported by the 3National Dementia Strategy (2009) and the 4Prime Minister's Challenge (2012), both of which call for a reduced use of drugs and a greater consideration of psychosocial interventions.

About Sing For Your Life

*Sing For Your Life is a registered UK charity. It designs, produces, co-ordinates and delivers participatory musical content to care homes and hospitals across the UK,



Europe and Canada through its Silver Song Clubs, its Silver Song Music Box, its Mustard Seed Singers and is now seeking to develop its musical delivery content to include interactive videos.

One of its objectives is to increase the therapeutic use of music in clinical settings by using a 'Silver Song Music Box'. There are now over 80 Music Boxes being used in NHS facilities and care homes across the UK, Europe and Canada.

The Silver Song Music Box is an electronic musical device produced by the charity. It comes with pre-uploaded songs, which can be altered in terms of speed and pitch as well as corresponding lyrics for each song (in a karaoke format) to suit the needs of the group.

The repertoire of songs and music can be augmented to meet the needs, preferences and interests of participants, hence allowing variety and individualisation. Sing For Your Life is now developing programmes to include traditional music from the Nepalese and Punjabi communities

The Music Box supports individuals in running singing sessions and its simplicity and flexibility make it easy to learn to use.

It does not assume musical knowledge although individuals do need to have skills to sensitively facilitate a group. It is also available as an iPad and Android App for people living at home, but who may benefit from engaged singing sessions.

Sing For Your Life has an established relationship with Kent and Medway NHS Trust and Care Partnership, initially through the Octavia Project and also through the local health and arts community in Kent. It agreed to lend Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust a Music Box for three months so that it could be trialed and evaluated within their services.

Moving on from the study

Since the trial, Kent and Medway NHS Partnership Trust has purchased four Silver Song Music Boxes and will continue to study the effects of therapeutic singing in the care of patients living with dementia, stroke and Parkinson's.

Further information about Sing For Your Life

Please visit <http://singforyourlife.org.uk> or email info@singforyourlife.org.uk

References:

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- (2) NICE – SCIE Dementia Guidelines (2006) - Joint publication: Dementia - Supporting people with dementia and their carers in health and social care www.scie.org.uk/publications/misc/dementia/
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- (4) Prime Minister's Challenge - <http://dementiachallenge.dh.gov.uk/about-the-challenge/>
- (5) Call to action: the use of antipsychotic drugs for people with dementia www.institute.nhs.uk/qipp/calls_to_action/dementia_and_antipsychotic_drugs.html