The Multisensory Environment (MSE) in Dementia Care: Examining Its Role and Quality From a User Perspective


Key Concepts/Context

Multisensory environments (MSEs) are treatment spaces designed to stimulate a patient’s senses of sound, touch, sigh, smell, and movement. Over the past 20 years healthcare professionals have used MSEs in a variety of forms, particularly to provide treatment for patients living with dementia. Studies have shown that MSEs can help stimulate and potentially revitalize specific sensory functions in dementia patients. However, due to the wide range of approaches and equipment used by different MSEs, further research is needed to better understand how the intervention might be optimized for dementia treatment in care homes.

Methods

16 different care homes with experience using MSE were observed in this study. The researchers gathered patient information and physical design data through field observations and semi-structured interviews. All data were statistically analyzed and organized into themes for final analysis.

Findings

The majority of staff members interviewed in this study indicated that training resources for operating MSEs were limited, and noted that more training materials should focus on how to personalize the MSE experience. Interviewees suggested that the MSE might be most effective in treating patients living with advanced forms of dementia. Lastly, staff suggested that MSE designs could be made more age-appropriate for dementia patients and could potentially feature familiar objects for added therapeutic benefit. Many staff members expressed uncertainty as to what they were supposed to do while occupying the MSE with patients receiving
treatment. Overall, staff did observe that MSEs could effectively reduce patient anxiety.

Limitations

The authors note that their decision to study only care homes located within a specific region of their country may have introduced a location bias within the results. The presence of the researchers themselves may have affected participant responses. Patients who used MSEs themselves were not consulted in this study.

Design Implications

Multisensory environments can be effective tools for enhancing the quality of life for patients living with dementia. Designers might consider how the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensory features of an MSE could be optimized to provide maximum benefits to patients, while also leaving room for flexibility in these designs so that treatment processes could be customized for different patients.