



Giving the best day possible

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Within a generation, more than 1 million Canadians are expected to have dementia and we will jump from one new case every *five* minutes to one every *two* minutes. As the incidence of dementia increases, the current gaps in the quality of dementia care in long-term care settings will only multiply, unless there is a fundamental shift in the model of care that begins with the question: What can we do differently to give each person with dementia the best day possible?

Our goal is to make person-centred care the norm rather than the exception.

There is an urgent need to change the culture in long-term care from task centred to *person-centred care*. A person-centred approach recognizes that each person with dementia is a unique individual, regardless of the disease stage, and that care needs to be individually tailored to each person's own particular needs, interests, habits and desires.

Caregivers can learn from family and friends, life histories, observations, conversations, and other care staff about the person's values, personality, needs, interests, likes and dislikes. What gives Susan joy and comfort? Is she an early bird or a late riser? What does she like to eat? What are her favourite colours? Did she paint or play music as a younger woman? What's the best way to settle her when she becomes agitated? What makes her smile or laugh?

Support of a person-centred approach in programs and practices by staff, management and owners of long-term care homes leads to better outcomes and enhances the quality of life and the quality of care for people living with the disease and their families. The staff also benefit from being treated themselves as they are asked to treat residents.

Staff often have the best intentions to care for their residents as whole people but the "culture" of the home thwarts them. In a person-centred care culture, staff can be empowered to give the kind of support they learn helps residents best.

Nurses can be leaders in shifting the culture in long-term care homes towards more person-centred care. Nurses are trained holistically to treat the whole person, not just the symptoms of disease. They understand the importance of emotionally connecting with people with dementia, of providing comfort, support and stimulation, as well as physical care.

Nurse leaders are in a strong position to advocate for a person-centred approach in homes. They can motivate, educate and support direct care staff in their efforts to provide person-centred care for people with dementia.

Front-line nurses can help one another by sharing information about each resident and offering creative solutions to problems in team meetings, family conferences and informal conversations. They can look for other champions of person-centred care in their home and start conversations to find out what their organization could do differently to give each resident the best possible day.

Nurses also understand that families are an integral part of the care team, not just consulted as an afterthought. In a person-centred home, families are invited and encouraged to be at the centre of care. They help the resident maintain normalcy and a sense of continuity, and can share their intimate knowledge of that person with caregivers, so creative ways to improve the person's day emerge.

Changing the culture of care through a person-centred approach is the best way to improve the experience of people with dementia in care homes. Our goal is to make person-centred care the norm rather than the exception. I invite all nurses to join and follow the conversation that the Alzheimer Society is facilitating nationwide. We don't have all the answers, but we are starting a "different" conversation about long-term care for people with dementia, one of person-centredness. ■