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Scent, Memory Links Studied

By Erica Plouffe Lazure

An East Carolina University recreational therapist is exploring links between scent, memory and well being in people with Alzheimer's disease.

David Loy received a \$20,919 grant this summer from ECU's Division of Research and Graduate Studies to explore this link. Working with an aromatherapist and six long-term care facilities across the state, Loy hopes the 20-week study will help improve quality of life for those with Alzheimer's disease and to provide potential alternatives to psychotropic medications.

"People are looking for ways to help their clients. It helps individuals and it helps the staff and their ability to care for them," Loy said. We think it might be a nice, non-pharmacological way to improve the quality of life for people who have Alzheimer's."

In 2003, Loy met aromatherapist Jackie Farnell at a regional recreational therapy conference and learned of her success helping people with Alzheimer's in long-term care facilities with their appetite loss and aggressive behavior. Farnell, of South Carolina, said scent is the strongest link to memory and can stimulate natural development of deficient chemicals in the brain.

"When people smell things, they are linked immediately and unconsciously to the past," she said. "When you take a vitamin or an essential oil, it is made up of the same groups of molecules that the body is made of, so it recognizes it. It uses what it needs and the rest is eliminated. When the body takes on a chemical substance, it hangs out and sits in the liver until the liver adjusts itself to process it and it can become toxic."

The study underway in long-term care facilities enables Loy to look at how appetite and moods are affected by the scents. As a way to stimulate appetite, a mix of grapefruit and cloves is sprayed on patients' bibs before mealtime. A mix of grapefruit and frankincense is used to help curb the so-called Sundown symptoms that often occur during the early evenings. Participants who receive one scent do not receive the other scent. A third scent, a mix of rosemary and orange, is offered to caregivers and staff to help ease stress and stimulate creativity. In the past, Farnell said she has seen dozens of people helped by the aromas and hopes even more will be helped through this study.

"These scents release serotonin and endorphins and can decrease depression and pain in the brain," she said. "If people are more alert, it decreases falls. And because people are feeling better, they sleep better, which makes them sturdier on their feet during the day."

Loy's research as a recreational therapist has focused on coping with disability, and while this project differs from his former projects, he does see a strong connection.

"I like to study coping and adjustment of disability. Oftentimes I work with physical ways of dealing with coping. This is tangential to my coping research; aromatherapy can be another way to cope," he said.

This summer, he piggybacked this research and offered scented patches to children who have been identified with behavioral and emotional problems. Loy said it has taken a bit of convincing that scent-based treatment would be effective.

"I'm a scientist who believes nothing works without evidence; prove it to me," he said. "I am working with an aromatherapist who believes everything can be cured through scents. I must admit, I'm becoming a believer, because of some of the data."

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