Tips for social workers supporting people with dementia

Dear Colleague,

I recently wrote to principal social workers outlining my proposals to develop good practice guidance for social workers supporting people with dementia. I am pleased to confirm that work to develop this guidance is now underway and will form part of the Department of Health’s work to support the Prime Minister’s Challenge on Dementia.

Targeted advice for social workers providing care and support for people with dementia - both pre and post-diagnosis - will have benefits in several ways, including:

- Increased awareness of dementia and mild cognitive impairments and the skills and behaviours social workers will need;
- Providing an additional source of good practice for safeguarding and working with capacity; and
- Supporting continuous professional development.

The guidance will cover a range of practice issues and gaps in service provision which social work can address, including: young onset/working age dementia; mild cognitive impairments; transition between various services and agencies; and developing the market in community based services to support excluded/marginalised groups, such as the homeless, prisoners and gypsies and travellers.
I am working closely with policy leads, The College of Social Work and national and local experts and will be holding some events with social workers later this year to help shape and inform the guidance, which will be available by April 2015.

However, in the meantime, it is important that we build on the momentum and enthusiasm for this work. That is why I have enclosed some interim tips for social workers supporting people with dementia, based on your responses to the questionnaire circulated with my previous letter.

Additionally, social workers will find it really useful to refer to the guidance in the link below, which sets out best practice in assessment and risk enablement for people living with dementia.


I know that many of you are already championing excellent social work practice to deliver the best possible outcomes for people with dementia. However, we want to ensure that all social workers, wherever they are based, can benefit from some quick, simple tips, to help improve both the quality of social work practice in this area and the support available for users of services, their carers and families.

I hope you will share these tips with your social work teams and encourage feedback and reflection as part of their continuing professional development.

Yours faithfully,

Lyn Romeo

Chief Social Worker for Adults
Tips for social workers supporting people with dementia

**Do**

**Do keep it simple**
Work out how best to communicate with the person with dementia. Try to avoid jargon, and use clear and accessible language.

**Do take time to get to know the person**
Spend time visiting the person: try to establish as clear a picture as possible of the person’s network, functioning, behaviour patterns and history.

**Do focus on the person’s strengths**
Try to support the person to maintain their hobbies and interests, and to remain connected to their local community.

**Do keep good records**
Keep good records of what you learn about the person. Information about the person’s life history may be particularly important for years to come, in a range of care settings.

**Do work in partnership with carers**
Value the contribution, opinions and expertise of carers, and help them to access support too. Be sensitive to the fact that the person with dementia may have different views to the carer – and vice versa.

**Do monitor and review regularly**
Be aware that a person’s situation may change – for example due to changes in their health, their network, or their care arrangements – and yet the person may not be able or inclined to communicate these changes.

**Do support a person with dementia and their family to prepare for the future**
Making decisions about future care and financial arrangements is important, and is best tackled as early as possible in the course of the illness.
Don’t

Don’t rely only on telephone updates or assessments

A person with dementia or a mild cognitive impairment may not be able to convey an accurate picture of how they are managing, so take time to visit the person.

Don’t forget that some people may be reluctant to accept support

Some people may have difficulty accepting or talking about their diagnosis of dementia. Others may simply not want to engage with services. Work out how best to develop a rapport with that person, and be prepared to take a step back if necessary.

Don’t overlook the role of other professionals/agencies

Liaise regularly and reliably with other professionals and agencies involved in supporting the person with dementia, and consider hosting joint training and networking opportunities.

Don’t forget about your own professional development

Keep up to date with best practice in dementia care.

Remember

Remember to find time for reflective learning and practice

Recognise the psychological and emotional impact of supporting people with dementia and make sure you have appropriate supervision and support mechanisms in place.