

Media memories help people with dementia to unlock the past

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(PhysOrg.com) -- People with dementia are to be given help to unlock their memories, thanks to academic research by teams at the Universities of St Andrews and Dundee.

A programme of scientific research involving more than 100 people with [dementia](#), as well as their families and care staff, was conducted to ascertain exactly what stimulates their long-term memories.

Dr Arlene Astell, Senior Lecturer at the University of St Andrews' School of Psychology, said, 'Our research found that we could very successfully use generic contents to stimulate people's memories. Generic items, such as a photograph of a beach, have an advantage over personal content, such as family pictures and videos, because there is no pressure to associate them with a correct date, name or place.'

'It can be upsetting for people with dementia and their families if they can not remember the details of family memorabilia. However, there are no right answers with generic items and whatever story people choose to tell is the right one.'

The research has led to the development of two new systems designed to facilitate communication - the Computer Interactive Reminiscence and Conversation Aid (CIRCA) and the Living in the Moment system.

The CIRCA system acts as a memory prompt, holding a tailored collection of music, radio, pictures and videos to allow people with

dementia and their carers to share recollections and communicate more effectively.

Sharing is also important for the Living in the Moment system, which provides a range of computer-based activities for people with dementia to enjoy with another person. The activities are designed to encourage skill and creativity and were developed in partnership with people with dementia to ensure that their needs and capabilities were matched.

Gary Gowans and his team at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, Part of the University of Dundee developed the look and feel of the systems.

'From the very beginning we applied a human-centred approach to the design process,' he said. 'I feel that this was essential, particularly when considering the kind of impairment experienced by many of our users, as well as their inexperience with contemporary technology.'

'Over 100 people with dementia, as well as their families and care staff, were involved in studies to determine exactly what stimulates positive reminiscence and rewarding interactions.'

Dr Norman Alm and colleagues at Dundee's School of Computing created the interactive software based on their long experience in assistive technology and user-centered design. He said, 'The best systems hide all the complexity in the background. We wanted users to be able to forget about the technology and just get on with using it.'

Dr Arlene Astell added, 'Communicating with others and carrying out meaningful activities are core features of what it is to be human. Effective communication with their carers gives people with dementia a way to positively express themselves and improves their overall quality of life.'

'We have spent ten years researching and selecting not only the most evocative material for the systems, but also the ergonomics and how people interact with them.'

The Universities have recently licensed CIRCA and Living in the Moment for sale to care homes and clinics by Dementia Life Ltd. The company have just launched commercial versions of the two systems which contain over 3,000 pieces of generic content from the archives of the BBC, ITV and Trinity Mirror. Initial trials have already led to the adoption of the Dementia Life system by Sanctuary Care, which operates over 50 care homes in England, and substantial interest from other care providers.

Dementia is a term used to describe a set of symptoms that affect areas of cognition such as memory, attention, language, and problem solving.

Approximately one in five people over the age of 85 and one third of those over 95 will develop dementia - two thirds of those will be women.

Provided by University of Dundee

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