

Fighting Parkinson's with the power of dance

April 11 2014, by Kate Haggman



Professors Gene Moyle and Graham Kerr are collaborating with Queensland Ballet, Parkinson's Queensland and UQ on a program to use dance to improve the quality of life of Parkinson's sufferers. Credit: Erika Fish

Brisbane researchers are measuring the power of dance for a special group of Queenslanders.

Dance and health academics from QUT and The University of Queensland are working with Queensland Ballet and Parkinson's Queensland on a [pilot program](#) that aims to improve both the health and

wellbeing of people affected by the neurological disease.

Queensland Ballet's Dance for Parkinson's pilot program offers free [dance](#) workshops in its West End studios for people with Parkinson's disease and their carers, facilitated by Dance for Parkinson's specialist Erica Rose Jeffrey.

But it's much more than just an exercise class.

"Dance for Parkinson's welcomes people affected by Parkinson's into the Queensland Ballet family - they're in the studios interacting with the professional dancers, learning parts of the company's repertoire, watching the professionals' daily ballet classes, seeing the dress rehearsals," said Associate Professor Gene Moyle, head of QUT Creative Industries' dance discipline.

"That strong social interaction with the Queensland Ballet community is a really important factor in promoting long-term happiness and emotional fulfilment in a group of people who are managing the burden of a degenerative condition.

"One of the effects of Parkinson's is a steady reduction in brain function, which can lead to depression, lethargy and apathy.

"The strong bonds Dance for Parkinson's participants forge within this supportive community can make all the difference to their mental health - and learning to express themselves creatively can be a fantastic mood enhancer."

Queensland Ballet CEO Anna Marsden said her Company was passionate about celebrating the health and fitness benefits of ballet with the community and was proud to introduce Dance for Parkinson's to Queensland.

"This innovative program, the first Dance for Parkinson's program offered by a professional dance company in Australia, is a great example of how arts and science can work together to improve the lives of those affected by Parkinson's."

Queensland Ballet's pilot program is based on a similar New York program developed by David Leventhal and the Mark Morris Dance Group.

Prior international research suggests that, as well as positive impacts on quality of life, dance can also improve cognitive performance and reaction times, making it a useful means of alleviating symptoms for a number of conditions, including arthritis, dementia, depression and Parkinson's.

The Queensland researchers will rigorously assess the physical health, social, emotional and psychological benefits of Queensland Ballet's program.

The research is voluntary among participants and care givers, and involves clinical measurements, questionnaires, personal interviews, observational filming and journal reflections.

Neuroscientist with QUT's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation Professor Graham Kerr said combining cardio with strategy, coordination and rhythm may be particularly helpful for people with Parkinson's, whose neural pathways have degenerated, making it increasingly difficult for the brain to transmit signals to the body.

"Parkinson's has a profound effect on movement so anything we can do to improve their flexibility, balance and coordination will be beneficial," said Professor Kerr, who is also the Vice President of Parkinson's Queensland.

"People with Parkinson's typically become quite stiff and rigid. The risk of falling over and being severely injured is very high. Fractured skulls and hips are quite common.

"Our study will measure exactly how much the exercise delivered through Dance for Parkinson's improves balance, walking and coordination as well as quality of life and well-being."

The findings of the research are expected to be released later this year.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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