

Awakening dementia patients to a better life

Beyond drugs to human interaction



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We expect medicine to help us and those we love.

But in America's culture of Alzheimer's care, how medicine is used can sometimes harm a patient. For many of the 5.3 million Americans with Alzheimer's, inappropriate use of antipsychotic drugs diminishes quality of life.

With Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, instances can occur where a normally mild-mannered person can become disruptive or physically violent toward caregivers or family members. The oft-used "treatment" is antipsychotic drugs, which often calm the patient, but which, over time, can become chemical restraints. Prolonged use can lead to what has been described as a "zombie" effect, where a person under heavy sedation might have an empty gaze or stop talking.

The Awakenings initiative proposes to change the way antipsychotic drugs are used in nursing homes and how physicians, nursing home teams, and families work together. We want to awaken residents who have Alzheimer's or other dementia-related illness to a fuller, richer life.

We piloted Awakenings at Ecumen Scenic Shores, a Two Harbors, Minn., nursing home, in 2009. Based on remarkable results, and thanks to a \$3.8 million state grant, we're expanding Awakenings to Ecumen's other 14 Minnesota nursing homes. We're hopeful that what we learn will provide Alzheimer's best-practice guidance to others nationally.

Overuse of antipsychotic drugs in nursing homes

To understand Awakenings, it helps to understand the way medicine is often used to treat people with Alzheimer's and other types of dementia. It's common for antipsychotic drugs to be prescribed to stop violent or aggressive behavior that can accompany these diseases. For some people, antipsychotic drugs can play an appropriate role. For others, they can effectively end life for the still-living.

Long-term use often results in a "zombie" effect—and antipsychotic use in some cases has worsened cognitive functioning among people with dementia, causing stroke, pneumonia, or other adverse effects.

Relationship care—a better way

We piloted Awakenings to see whether residents with behavioral symptoms related to Alzheimer's or other dementias could enjoy better life quality if behavioral and environmental interventions were fully integrated into the care plan.

This shift requires significant collaboration to get to the root cause of behavioral issues. "Circle of care" teams are built around each resident, involving doctors, nurses, other nursing home staff, and family. The focus goes beyond drugs to human connections and interactions.

As residents in the Two Harbors facility were weaned off antipsychotics, staff engaged more with residents, taking them on walks, playing games, and exercising. Certified nursing assistants assumed a more important role. Therapies using validation, reminiscence, music, aroma, and pets were employed to improve residents' physical and cognitive functions.

Within six months, we eliminated the use of antipsychotics among all residents, and antidepressant use decreased by 30 to 50 percent. Before the pilot project, the home was quiet; several residents

preferred to stay in bed and others held a vacant gaze. Today, it's not uncommon to see residents playing balloon volleyball.

Reawakening

Here is one example of how Awakenings worked with one resident, whose name has been changed in this article to protect her privacy. Marjorie had a fear of incontinence. That fear led to her desire to continually go to the restroom. It was an intense and repetitive thought process that prevented her from partici-

pating fully in daily life. Antipsychotic drugs she'd been prescribed to stop the behaviors hadn't succeeded. The care team went beyond medications to get to the core of her anxiety.

Using talk therapy and interventions, engaging family members, building her self-confidence, stopping antipsychotic medications, and introducing exercise back into Marjorie's life have made an enormous difference. She has moved to regularly scheduled bathroom breaks, breaking free of her desire to repeatedly visit the restroom and stay there. She's eating and sleeping again, which has led to a new, healthy way of dealing with incontinence and her fears. Marjorie is awake and living, and her family shares the happiness she can still convey.

No Alzheimer's cure exists today. But we believe that an integrated relationship-care approach like Awakenings can bring many of the estimated 27,000 Minnesota nursing home residents on antipsychotic drugs new vitality, joy, and dignity.

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