

Australia launches world's largest music therapy trial



University of Melbourne researcher **Felicity Baker** reports on the world's largest music therapy trial for people with dementia. She explains why the project could be a game changer for music therapy, dementia care, and residential care

In April this year, supported by a \$1 million National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) research grant, The University of Melbourne launched the first large-scale cluster randomised control trial that studies the effectiveness of music therapy on people living with dementia in residential care.

Over three years, our University of Melbourne research team, in collaboration with international partners, will undertake the world's largest music therapy trial for people living with dementia, studying its impact on 500 participants across 40 residential aged care facilities in Australia. Our team secured the NHMRC grant based on pilot data and a long history of music therapy practice in the aged care sector in Australia. While music therapy has been practiced in aged care here for a very long time, there hasn't been this kind of large-scale, systematic study of its use in dementia care anywhere in the world.

Acknowledging the future challenges that lie ahead for an ageing Australia, the Government established the Boosting Dementia Grant Scheme through the NHMRC to fund research that targets depression and wellbeing in the lives of people with dementia and those caring for them. Primary aims of the scheme include the development and testing of cost-effective interventions targeting:

- Reductions in incidences of high levels of depression and suicide.

- Non-pharmacological management of neuropsychiatric symptoms and behaviours.
- Quality of life, social isolation, and participation in meaningful experiences.
- Residential care staff stress.

To address these aims, our research seeks to test existing practices of group music therapy and choral singing on the aforementioned target areas in a systematic way and thus gather evidence of effectiveness and inform health care planning and policy for an ageing Australian population.

The study, Music Interventions for Depression and Dementia in the Elderly (MIDDEL), will compare the impact of group music therapy, recreational choir singing, a combination of both and standard care on symptoms of depression and other wellbeing outcomes in people with dementia.

Further, we aim to examine whether dosage has an effect on depression and other outcomes, (two sessions per week versus one session per week), and whether the effects differ according to baseline levels of depression and dementia.

We will build a health economic analysis into our study, the first of its kind in music therapy, that focuses on dementia care. The analysis will enable us to determine the cost-benefit of both types of interventions on outcomes for people living with dementia in residential settings which we anticipate will inform future policy, funding, and dementia



University of Melbourne researchers, including the author (third right), during a group music therapy session for people with dementia. Photo: Giulia Giannini McGauran

care practice.

As we hypothesise that group music therapy will reduce neuropsychiatric symptoms (eg agitation) that are distressing for both the person with dementia and care staff, we will also embed an analysis of staff wellbeing, collecting data such as number of days absent from work due to illness and measure their sense of burden in the workplace. This data will also be included in the cost-benefit analysis.

Group music therapy

The core principle of group music therapy (GMT) is affect regulation through active, reciprocal music making with the use of singing and musical instruments. This music making facilitates the relationship between the music therapist and the person living with dementia, and between participants in the group. The approach takes into account the level of dementia severity and symptoms that can vary from person to person and from session to session. The

core intention of GMT is to meet the psychosocial needs of each person living with dementia, which in turn is thought to reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety and to stimulate overall social and emotional wellbeing.

GMT also aims to work in the 'here and now' by responding to participants' immediate emotional expressions, acknowledging them, and validating their emotions by transforming them into meaningful musical expressions for therapeutic gain. It features concepts of personhood (recognition, trust, respect). Its conceptual framework is grounded in McDermott and colleagues' (2014) psychosocial model of music in dementia.

In summary, the core aims of GMT are:

- To meet the psychosocial needs of people with dementia.
- To empower the person with dementia with resources that promote affect regulation and attunement.
- To foster empathy



A group music therapy session for people with dementia.

Photo: Giulia Giannini McGauran

relationships.

- To foster and improve verbal, non-verbal, and musical communications between the person with dementia and other group members.
- To reduce behavioural and psychological symptoms (agitation, apathy, depression etc) through regulation of emotions.
- Foster relationship-building through musical interactions.
- Target mental stimulation, mood enhancement, reciprocal interaction, and human connection.
- Support responses in the here and now.
- Flexibility to support participation.
- Support identity/history of the person.

Returning to the aforementioned aims of the NHMRC Boosting Dementia Grant Scheme, our project aims to be a game changer for music therapy, dementia care, and residential care. We hypothesise that engagement in group musical experiences will lead to reductions in levels of depression with a flow-on effect to a more positive quality of life, reduced social isolation, and less severe neuropsychiatric symptoms. A focus on residential care staff stress will also serve to generate knowledge about how music interventions can enhance the residential care home environments.

Music, Mind and Wellbeing

The University of Melbourne-based Music, Mind and Wellbeing (MMW) initiative links neuroscience with music and social wellbeing. In addition to the MIDDEL trial, the MMW Research Group has additional studies under way as part of its commitment to developing novel music therapy-informed interventions that aim to change the lives of people living with neurological disorders including dementia. They include:

Remini-Sing, an NHMRC-ARC funded research project led by Dr Jeanette Tamplin, is investigating the effect of weekly therapeutic singing groups on relationship quality and wellbeing between people living with dementia in the community and their family caregivers. Pilot feasibility research found that participants perceived intrapersonal, social, and cognitive benefits while sustaining healthy ratings for relationship quality, quality of life, depression and anxiety.

The next phase of this research, a randomised controlled trial, will compare outcomes for participants who attend 20 weekly Remini-Sing group intervention sessions with wait-listed control participants. Participants are now being recruited from metropolitan Melbourne, Bendigo and Hobart, and it will be possible for all participants to continue to attend these groups, if they wish, following the study period.

To register interest contact Carol Fountain at Uniting AgeWell on (03) 9251 5997 or CFountain@unitingagewell.org

The Group Songwriting study is funded by the Dementia Australia Hazel Hawke Dementia Fellowship 2018, awarded to Dr Imogen Clark. Designed for community-dwelling people living with dementia and their family caregivers this single-blinded random controlled trial is exploring the potential of group songwriting to improve participants' health, wellbeing and quality of life.

The 60 participants recruited to the study will be allocated to either an experimental condition with six weekly group songwriting sessions or usual care control group with the option of group songwriting following completion of the study if desired.

Based on pilot data, the research team anticipates that the intervention will support sustained healthy relationship quality for couples/dyads, improve social connectedness and quality of life, and reduce ratings of depression for both people living with dementia and their family caregivers. Songs written during the project will also be performed and recorded to increase public awareness and understanding about living with dementia.

Music and mood study

Mood Regulation Using Music: A Community Health Strategy for Improving Quality of Life in People with Mild Dementia is an NHMRC-ARC funded research project led by Dr Sandra Garrido from Western Sydney University. The project aims to improve quality of life by promoting effective self-management of mood via music. People with dementia and their carers or support person, whether living at home or in a care facility, are invited to participate. Participants will be provided with a set of guidelines for music selection, equipment for playing music and an iTunes gift card. The study will look at how useful the guidelines are to people caring for someone with dementia in using music to target particular symptoms such as depression, apathy or agitation.

In another study Dr Garrido and her colleagues in occupational therapy are looking at the power of music to help people with mild to moderate dementia who are experiencing difficulty in performing everyday tasks at home.

To inquire about participating in either of these studies, email Dr Garrido at s.garrido@westernsydney.edu.au or phone 0403 870 050.



From left: Dr Sandra Garrido, Dr Imogen Clarke and Dr Jeanette Tamplin

More information on the MIDDEL trial is available at: <https://bit.ly/2rvHpQU>. ■

Acknowledgments

The project team comprises: Professor Felicity Baker, The University of Melbourne; Professor Christian Gold, UniResearch, Bergen, Norway; Professor Hannah Mette Ridder, Aalborg University, Denmark; Dr Jeanette Tamplin, The University of Melbourne; Dr Imogen

Clark, The University of Melbourne; Dr Claire Lee, The University of Melbourne. Industry partners are Bupa Aged Care, Regis Aged Care, BlueCross, and Royal Freemasons Homes.

■ Professor Felicity Baker is Head of Music Therapy, Co-Director of the National Music Therapy Research Unit and Co-Director of the Creative Arts Therapies Research Unit at The University of Melbourne. She is former Australia

Research Council Future Fellow (2011-2015) in the area of music therapy. Contact her at: felicity.baker@unimelb.edu.au

Reference

McDermott O, Orrell M, Ridder HM (2014) The importance of music for people with dementia: The perspectives of people with dementia, family carers, staff and music therapists. *Aging and Mental Health* 18(6) 706-716.