

At-home arts program a ‘prescription’ for wellbeing

Arts on Prescription at Home (AoP@Home) is a participatory arts program now being offered in the homes of people living with dementia and their family members in Sydney, providing opportunities for creative engagement and improved wellbeing. **Claire O’Connor, Roslyn Poulos, Michelle Heldon, Linda Barclay, Elizabeth Beattie and Christopher Poulos** report

Most people with dementia live in the community and are supported by family carers. Over time, access to community services and maintaining hobbies becomes more difficult and people can become isolated (Alzheimer’s Australia 2014), leading to poorer quality of life for both the person with dementia and their family carer (Giebel *et al* 2014; Pertl *et al* 2015). Interventions that positively address social functioning and shared leisure engagement are associated with improved outcomes for both the person with dementia and their family supporters (DiLauro *et al* 2017; van der Lee *et al* 2014) and may contribute to people with dementia being able to remain living at home for longer (Spijker *et al* 2008).

Arts on Prescription

The evidence for arts supporting wellbeing is growing (Kaimal *et al* 2016; Secker *et al* 2018). For example, gallery-based art programs have been shown to specifically improve wellbeing in couples living with dementia (Burnside *et al* 2017; Johnson *et al* 2017). The Arts on Prescription (AoP) model is one way to deliver participatory art for older people living in the community with a range of health and wellness needs, including dementia. The idea behind the arts ‘prescription’ is to emphasise to participants that their health care professional sees the positive



The photos on the following pages were shared by HammondCare’s Arts on Prescription at Home (AoP@Home) team

value that participation in the arts, alongside their traditional health care, has in helping them achieve greater wellbeing (HammondCare 2017; Poulos *et al* 2019).

AoP involves professional artists actively guiding and engaging groups of six-eight clients in making art during eight to 10 weekly two-hour sessions, using each client’s preferred art form (eg, visual arts, music, drama, poetry performance, singing, printmaking, clay work, photography) (HammondCare 2017).

Based on a successful social prescribing program first delivered in the UK in 1995 (Rigby 2004), an AoP model was specifically developed for older people by Australian aged care provider

wellness (Poulos *et al* 2019). HammondCare continues to offer AoP programs to its clients in Greater Sydney, with plans to expand the program into Victoria and regional NSW.

To access HammondCare’s AoP program, participants need to be living in the community and have a referral from a healthcare or aged care practitioner (eg, home care manager, GP, allied health professional, nurse, pharmacist, social worker) and be experiencing at least one of the following: declining physical ability or frailty, chronic pain, anxiety, depression, social isolation, recent bereavement, mild to moderate cognitive impairment, or being a carer and experiencing difficulties.

Importantly, the program, as offered by HammondCare, is different from many other arts and health initiatives because it follows a structured, evidence-based formula, is highly participatory and



employs professional artists who have completed specific AoP training. This training is a robust program designed to be delivered over two days. Key content includes: the context and research evidence for AoP in the aged care sector; the role of the AoP artist and their skill-building; understanding the health and wellness needs of older people; legal and ethical frameworks; and preparing and designing AoP programs.

Benefits of AoP

Findings suggest that AoP improves self-reported mental health and wellbeing in older people with a range of unmet health needs, including dementia, providing empowerment and creating a sense of purpose and direction (Poulos *et al* 2019; Rigby 2004). The preliminary AoP study in Sydney (Poulos *et al* 2019) resulted in the development of a freely available AoP sector guide designed to help other organisations deliver their own AoP programs (see box this page for details).

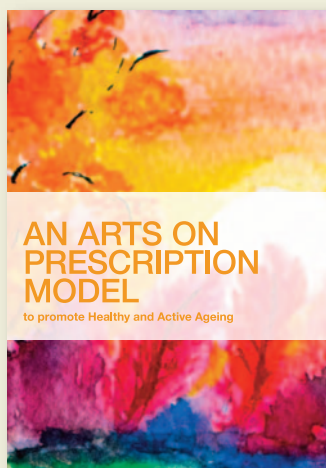
Arts on Prescription at Home

Until recently, AoP was restricted to group-based programs in community centres in Greater Sydney. Following the positive outcomes from the Sydney-based AoP group program, the HammondCare and UNSW team devised a variation of the model, called Arts on Prescription at Home (AoP@Home), specifically for people living with dementia and their carers who find it challenging to attend a community centre for a group program.

AoP@Home involves eight to 10 weekly participatory art sessions delivered by a professional artist in the client's home. A range of art forms are possible, with selection based on individual client preference (eg. visual arts, music, drama, singing). In addition to specific AoP@Home training designed to supplement the original AoP training, the artists involved also undergo dementia

The Arts on Prescription guide

An Arts on Prescription Model to Promote Healthy and Active Ageing is a free guide designed to help other aged care organisations deliver their own AoP programs to promote healthy and active ageing. It provides a background to AoP, an overview of the HammondCare AoP model and insight into how HammondCare delivers the program to its clients, in order to guide others who may want to establish a similar service.



The guide is freely available to download at www.hammond.com.au/arts-on-prescription-sector-guide/file.

awareness training with HammondCare's Dementia Centre.

In 2016, the NHMRC Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration funded a small pilot of AoP@Home for six people living with dementia and their family carers in Sydney. Positive outcomes from this trial for both the person with dementia and their family carer were recently published in the *Journal of Ageing and Social Change* (Poulos *et al* 2021). Benefits

included improved social interactions, a sense of achievement, and opportunities to be absorbed (or being 'in flow') in the process of art making so that everyday worries were put aside in the moment. The box on p22 describes the beneficial effects of AoP@Home for a father living with dementia and his son.

While AoP@Home was specifically developed for people with dementia and their family members,

HammondCare now offers AoP@Home to anyone with health and wellness needs. The at-home program for people with dementia and their family members is now called: AoP@Home – Arts and Dementia. Both AoP@Home and AoP@Home – Arts and Dementia can be offered under a range of aged care funding programs, including Home Care Packages (HCP), the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) and Short-Term Restorative Care (STRC) programs.

In November 2021, HammondCare began promoting the AoP@Home – Arts and Dementia program within its community aged care services in Sydney. In parallel, we (the authors) are currently evaluating its implementation. We expect the evaluation to be completed mid-2022, with project outcomes reported soon after. The research is funded by a NHMRC Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration Implementing Research Evidence into Practice Grant.

Research and resources

While the benefits of participatory art to support wellbeing are clear, and there are funding sources available to support program delivery, AoP@Home as a mainstream



A new way to engage

The following example, from the AoP@Home pilot study illustrates how the program can support wellbeing for people with dementia and their family members.

One visual artist worked with an older person living with dementia and his son. Over the course of 10 weeks, they sat together in their lounge every Thursday afternoon and created a series of artworks.

The artist supported and guided them both to work on projects and goals that held meaning for them. The father created a series of artworks representing symbols from his culture that were important to him. While he worked on these, his son developed a set of portraits of his father.

Throughout the weeks, they cherished this time together. It was a new way to engage, one of mutual relaxation, enjoyment and connection. The role of carer and the challenges of the disease slipped away in these moments of making.

Other family members would join in – grandchildren, cousins – and images of artworks were sent to family members overseas. The artist explored a range of mediums with the family, adapting to their abilities and interests.

At the end of the program, the artist presented their work in a book and framed as a keepsake and legacy. Their achievements were received, honoured and cherished.

Both father and son were proud of each other and themselves, discovering a new skill and interest individually, a new aspect of themselves, but also a new way to connect together.

The space cultivated by the artist created opportunity for the granddaughter to continue this creative loungeroom ritual beyond the life of the program, eventually extending it to include the family's wider community and networks.

service for people living with dementia and their family supporters is still in the early stages of development. Like all new services, especially those where research evidence is being translated into real world practice, determining the best means of implementation, and understanding implementation barriers, is important for the specific program being implemented, as well as to inform the aged care sector more generally about implementation.

Our research team is working in partnership with a project advisory group comprising people living with dementia or with identified memory impairment, and family carers, to maximise sustainability of the program. Because our evaluation is running in parallel with HammondCare's delivery of AoP@Home – Arts and Dementia, our research is also able to directly inform the implementation process. For example, outcomes from focus groups on barriers and enablers to AoP@Home implementation are being used to inform development of the program model.

The project will also develop an AoP@Home – Arts and Dementia sector guide to



complement the AoP sector guide mentioned earlier. Due to be released after project completion in 2022, this will provide insights for other aged care providers and professional artists trained in AoP into how AoP@Home can be used for families living with dementia.

We also aim to establish an online resource hub to support professional artists and care providers to deliver AoP@Home.

Want to know more?

For more information about the AoP@Home study, contact

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For information about how to access an AoP@Home program, contact HammondCare's Arts Engagement Coordinator on (02) 8788 3900. ■



The reference list for this article is on the AJDC website at <https://bit.ly/janfeb2022-article-references>, or scan this QR code to access.



■ Top row, L-R: Dr Claire O'Connor (Research Fellow, HammondCare, Conjoint Lecturer, School of Population Health, UNSW) is principal investigator on the AoP@Home implementation project; Honorary Associate Professor Roslyn Poulos (UNSW) is co-investigator on AoP@Home implementation project and principal investigator on AoP@Home pilot study; Michelle Heldon (Arts Engagement Manager, HammondCare, Art and Dementia coordinator, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia) is co-investigator on the AoP@Home implementation project and Arts Manager coordinating the AoP@Home programs. Bottom row, L-R: Linda Barclay (Arts Engagement Team Leader, HammondCare) is co-investigator on the AoP@Home implementation project and arts engagement team leader coordinating the AoP and AoP@Home programs; Professor Elizabeth Beattie (Director, Dementia Training Australia, formerly Director, Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration) is co-investigator on the AoP@Home implementation project and the AoP@Home pilot study; Professor Christopher Poulos (Head of Research and Aged Care Clinical Services, HammondCare and Conjoint Professor, School of Population Health, UNSW) is co-investigator on the AoP@Home implementation project and the AoP@Home pilot study. To follow up with the authors, contact Claire at coconnor@hammond.com.au