Remembering Yesterday Caring Today: Medical Research Council Project

The following summary of the MRC project is kindly supplied by Professor Bob Woods, University of Wales, Bangor, Research Project Co-ordinator:

This project aims to prepare the ground for a multi-centre, acceptably powered Randomised Controlled Trial of an innovative approach to reminiscence therapy, which involves the person with dementia and caregiver together, over the course of 12 weekly group meetings.

In this project, in collaboration with Pam Schweitzer, who was instrumental in developing this approach, has written a treatment manual (to be published shortly) so that in future studies the intervention can be provided in a standardised manner. Outcome measures have been developed, refined and validated; these assess aspects of the caregiving relationship jointly for caregiver and person with dementia, as well as autobiographical memory across the life-span.

Three groups for people with dementia and care-givers have been run in different centres, with a control condition in two centres involving groups for people with dementia meeting separately, as well as a treatment as usual comparison.

In total, 69 caregiver/person with dementia dyads were recruited for the trial, with 58 completing the treatment period. Patients are mainly in the mild to moderate phases of dementia (average MMSE score 19), and are all living in community settings.

Quality of life for the person with dementia (QoL-AD) and caregiver stress (GHQ) are the primary outcome measures in this study. The data will allow a power calculation to be carried out, to establish the sample size required for a definitive, large-scale study.

The results of the pilot trial will be considerably more substantial than any previous study, and will in themselves shape practice in the field. The outcome measures will allow a new focus on changes in the overall caregiver/patient relationship, rather than on each separately, applicable to a range of psychosocial interventions. The treatment manual will enable the approach to be widely disseminated, if the results prove to be encouraging.