The value of recreational activities within a care setting

Today's generation of older people entering residential care have lived through a time where recreation has been an essential component of emotional, physical and cultural wellbeing. We often take for granted the importance of opportunities to combine work, rest and play. How we spend our leisure time enhances who we are and a balanced lifestyle ensures we are a complete person.

Our need for recreation does not end as we age, nor on admission to residential care. Indeed, when the running of a household is no longer a consideration, we often have more time to enjoy hobbies and explore interests. This month's article focuses on the importance of recreational activity in people's lives and provides practical guidance on activities within a care home.

Care standards
In the introduction to standards 12–15 of the Care Homes for Older People: National Minimum Standards, the Department of Health (2002) highlight that:

- Social, cultural, recreational and occupational characteristics, which have taken a lifetime to emerge, do not suddenly disappear when individuals reach a later stage of life
- A home's information pack should provide details of social life and its range of activities
- Some people will want an active, well organized social life, while others will want a level of privacy and independence from other residents
- Many residents will need special support and assistance in engaging in the activities of daily life.

Julie Swann, an independent occupational therapist, provides ideas for enjoyable activities and describes the value of establishing a varied programme for residents.

We are all different
Everyone has a unique history; a portfolio of interests and 'personal baggage'. We need a combination of recreational activities that recognizes both our social needs and individual interests. Recreation is the component of our lives that enables us to exercise most choice. At work, we often have to suppress our individuality for the collective good but in leisure, the choice is ours.

Providing recreational activities based upon a good assessment of need is a significant key to unlocking the inherent skills within individuals. A resident's profile, as discussed in The Importance of Assessment in Residential Care (Swann, 2004), enables a full assessment of need. By recognizing older people's interests, we can determine how to help people to reach their full potential.

Types of activity
The types of activity will vary according to individual residents, the size of the group, the home and the availability of the care staff. Leisure activities can enhance our lives in many ways, for example:

- By expressing creativity (through art, craft, writing or dictating memoirs)
- By developing reflective activities through discussion and relaxation
- By enhancing self-esteem when imparting skills and knowledge to others – for example, by instructing others or through reminiscence or music and literature discussions
- By maintaining and improving physical abilities by active pastimes.

Often, an activity has several benefits and individuals' needs can be met in a group.
activity. For example, the game of dominos on a small group basis can be used to encourage individual social interaction, mental stimulation and communication, and encourage the use of hands, arm and trunk to improve manipulation skills, strength and balance.

There are three basic types of activities:

- **Passive activities** – requiring slight participation from the residents. Examples are: aromatherapy; listening to music; listening to talks from local people; watching a concert; watching television.

- **Semi-active activities** – involving more participation. These include: computer skills; quizzes; discussions; debates; reminiscence; reality orientation.

- **Active activities** – requiring more physical involvement from the residents. Examples are: art and craft; movement to music; yoga; table games; gardening; local outings; cookery; dancing. Some activities are individual and others are more group-focused. The list of activities is endless and will depend upon the resident’s abilities and skills, as well as the care staff’s skills and available resources, including budgets.

**How do we start?**

From an analysis of your residents’ profiles, you will find some common activities that people may wish to do. It may be impossible to cater for all needs, so a selection of activities within a session is useful. Some residents may join in for part of a session, while some people might choose not to join in at all. That is their choice and their right.

The first time I was asked to take a recreational session for residents, I asked my parents and their friends from the local old-age pensioners clubs what type of activities they would like to do if they moved into a care home. Their answers formed a template of activities for me, ranging from small group to larger group activities (Figure 1). To increase your resources and stretch your budget, you should ask visitors for items, perhaps by putting a strategically placed notice up (Figure 2).

There are many books on ideas for activities with residents, but start with a few activities and gradually build up a programme of activities. I use the ‘KISS’ principle – Keep It Simple and Safe!

**Planning a session**

There are no rules about the content of a session. However, you should provide a balanced programme that stimulates and encourages the maximum use of a resident’s abilities, ideally providing:

- **Social interaction** (via group activity)
- **Creative outlets** (via practical-based activity)
- **Mental stimulation and intellectual challenge** (via table games and quizzes)
- **Interaction with the local environment and community** (through visits from local groups and through outings)
- **Maximization of a resident’s level of physical function** (through movement to music and other active pursuits)
- **Continuation of pre-admission hobbies and interests**
- **Maintenance of social and cultural links**

The frailty of an individual should not prevent continuation of past interests. It is the process of leisure and the act of participation that is most significant, not the end result.

For craft activities, often a different technique can be used – for example, when painting, abstract images can be created. Small paintings are quick to do and can be turned into beautiful greetings...
active way. Homes should view the provision of recreational activities as an essential part of maintaining and caring for residents’ needs.

Where relevant, activities should be linked to the resident’s individual care plan. We are all complex people with a range of different needs, not just related to care. A home, through a structured approach to recreation, will improve the quality of life of its residents.


Implications for the home
The starting point for developing a positive approach to recreation is for the management to create an environment that recognizes the importance of care being a holistic approach.

Residential care is not just focusing on meeting people’s personal care needs. A total quality culture needs to be adopted by all staff. If group activities are being carried out, everyone has a part to play. Although one member of staff takes the session, the others need to be supportive – perhaps by helping to set up the session, being on toileting duty or taking an individual activity with another resident.

Activities need to be flexible and meet the resident’s needs at that moment in time. Recreation is not purely a tool of occupation or diversion, but recognized by all concerned as being integral to providing good quality care.

If the environment meets people’s higher social expectations, apart from the positive impact on individual residents, a home will look more attractive to potential future residents. This is often included in marketing materials.

Conclusions
Leisure is a vital part of our daily life, either in a passive, semi-active or active way. Homes should view the provision of recreational activities as an essential part of maintaining and caring for residents’ needs.

Where relevant, activities should be linked to the resident’s individual care plan. We are all complex people with a range of different needs, not just related to care. A home, through a structured approach to recreation, will improve the quality of life of its residents.

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KEY POINTS
- Activities are not just provided to play a diversion or a time-filling role.
- Recreation can be a therapeutic experience.
- Residents should have a choice of activities.
- Some coaxing may be required, but residents have the right to not participate.
- Individual and group activities should be available.
- Care home staff should slowly build up the sessions to a varied weekly programme.

Items needed
We are expanding our range of activities for residents. If you have any of the following, please leave them at the office:

- Art and craft materials (poster or watercolour paints, small paintbrushes, wool, card, fabric, ribbons, watercolour paper)
- Gardening equipment (plant pots, compost, seeds, trowels)
- Table games (cards, scrabble, dominoes)
- Quiz books
- Small prizes (e.g. soap, talc, ornaments)

Thank you