



Taking part in care home research – the care home perspective

We spoke to Anna Hicks, a peripatetic (roaming) Home Manager for the Orders of St John Care Trust in Oxfordshire. One of the homes where Anna works took part in the Improving Well-being and Health for People with Dementia (WHELD) study. In this Q&A Anna describes her experience of taking part in research, and the advice she'd give to other care homes and care home researchers.

Why did you decide to take part in the research?

There were many reasons. It was important for me and my staff to keep our knowledge and practice up to date. The staff got free training. It was an opportunity for us to learn how to develop our care and it was nice to be part of a different team. We were reassured by the project being Government backed and we wanted to work on developing best practice in dementia care. I had a high number of dementia residents here – so I was glad to do it.

What did taking part involve?

We worked on four areas - activities, person-centred care-planning, social interaction and anti-psychotic medication. We made changes and the researchers assessed what it was like for residents beforehand, and what it was like for them nine months later. The researchers held regular meetings with staff where they discussed the residents, dementia and any other issues.

What helped the process to go well?

At the beginning, a WHELD researcher came to talk to me and she was extremely informative. She explained what she would be covering and what support she would give the home. I then talked about the project at meetings with families, residents and staff – so it wasn't a stranger introducing it. Then the researchers wrote letters to everyone explaining what was involved. After that, I invited the researchers to a meeting where they could chat to everybody and answer any questions. They also came to the home and sat in areas where people could speak to them. So they spent a lot of time with people before the project started. That's important because some people are apprehensive about the unknown.

When the researchers came in to the home to work, they worked for a day alongside staff and residents. That was good because the staff felt like the researchers were part of the team.



At the end of the project, all of the homes that had taken part went to a meeting to discuss what they'd done. We all talked and shared information. It was helpful to network and learn from each other. We got certificates, had coffee and lunch. It was a nice end to the project.

What were the benefits of taking part?

I felt that all our residents, families and staff benefited. We got a lot out of it.

It was so successful that I started a dementia café - a knock-on benefit from the project. I also developed a 'getting to know you' process where every single member of staff now spends 10-15 mins, once a week with a different resident – that includes the cooks, domestics and me. We give each resident time to do what they want. One resident loves horse-racing, so one of our administrators brought in a racing paper, they had a glass of wine and had pretend bets on the horses.

I felt my staff got a lot out of it – because now they understand much more about dementia and look at residents' reactions in a different light.

Were there any downsides to taking part?

It did have an impact on the day-to-day running of the home, because where staff might normally have been working with residents, they were sitting with the researchers. Obviously, the well-being of our residents is our top priority and their needs have to come first. That meant on some days, we weren't able to conduct the research.

What advice would you give to researchers about doing care home research?

Be guided by managers and staff – they can help with finding the best way to carry out the research.

Try to allay any concerns people may have about being involved in research – particularly around privacy and confidentiality. As an example, one lady refused to let her mother join in because she thought it would be 'all over the newspapers'.

Have plenty of meetings and make it all transparent so that everybody can see what you're doing. Make it simple and straightforward - don't use any complicated words.

To keep homes motivated make sure taking part doesn't add costs or create an extra workload.

Respect people's wishes and explain to staff and residents that there is no obligation to take part.

Understand the needs of residents and treat them as individuals. If you want to talk about something and they want to talk about something else, you've just got to go with that. Every resident has different needs and abilities – you've got to see what those are. That's how you get good research and good results.

What advice would you give other care homes about research?

Well I'm just starting another research project here! I'd encourage them to do it.

There are real practical benefits – but like everything, you only get out what you put in. You've got to have people willing to do it, to make it worthwhile.

