

An audiobooks service for hospital patients with dementia

A hospital library that had nothing directly to do with patients living with dementia was turned into one that did. **Jason Ovens** tells the story behind its audiobooks service

Until recently the NHS trust Academy Library that I run had little interaction with patients on our wards. We were established essentially to support the library and information needs of staff and students on placement rather than patients. Now, in an important way, this has changed for the better.

Of course, our role continues of finding up-to-date research informing patient care, examples of best practice for service improvement or information for continuing professional development. But, three years ago, the trust board concluded that audiobooks could be the answer to an unmet need which had been identified on the wards, namely for activities to help keep patients with dementia stimulated and engaged during their time in hospital.

Alleviating boredom and distress

Audiobooks were seen as potentially alleviating the boredom of being in hospital and helping to calm people with dementia who became distressed. The Academy Library was contacted to see if this was something we could look into. The idea we came up with was to acquire dementia-friendly audio-players which patients could borrow during their stay on our wards.

These audio-players are called Simple Music Players, cost £97 each and are sold online by Koto. In March 2018 we applied to our innovation panel for £1600 in funding for 10 music players which can



have audiobooks preloaded by library staff. We also purchased headphones, then signed up to an audiobook subscription service, supplementing the thousands of books available to download freely because they are out of copyright.

Our choice of subscription service was Listening Books, which costs £100 a year and provides a service to over 50,000 members who may find it difficult to read the printed word. It gives access to thousands of audiobooks, radio programmes and TV shows. A staff member on the ward contacts us if they have a patient who has requested an audio-player or whom they think could benefit from one.

Historical romance and murder

We have found that the most popular genres are historical romance and murder mysteries. Agatha Christie, Georgette Heyer and Barbara Cartland are much in demand as are The Archers, Last of the Summer Wine, Hancock's Half Hour and Dad's Army. We can also upload freely available

podcasts and radio programmes, some of the most commonly requested being Desert Island Discs, Songs of Praise and Gardeners' Question Time. Sometimes a patient might have a more obscure or specific request which we are usually able to fulfil with a little more searching.

Library staff demonstrate and gather feedback

One of our roles is to take the music player to the ward, where we demonstrate how it works either to the patient or their family or a member of staff. It takes library staff about 20 minutes to get a player ready for use. After a week we will phone the ward to check on the patient's progress with the music player and enquire whether they would like any more listening material. When they have finished with the player, or when they leave the ward, we collect all the equipment and gather feedback.

Feedback from patients and staff has been positive, for example:

I really enjoyed listening to the audiobooks, thank you (patient).

The audio-player was the only thing that calmed down the patient, who was very distressed (ward staff).

...helped to occupy the patient to ensure they were not wandering and at higher risk of falls (ward staff).

Since the project launch two years ago, we have been pleased with the level of demand. Ensuring that the players, headphones and power cables are all returned hasn't always been easy and, despite clear labelling and instructions, a few pieces of equipment have gone missing. Power cables have been a surprisingly major casualty, perhaps because of their resemblance to phone chargers! But we expect these losses to diminish as staff become more familiar with the project and we get more requests for the players.

Rising demand

After 18 months we had provided the service to 130 patients and with a regular advertising boost in the trust monthly newspaper demand continues to rise.

Although we pioneered the project with patients with dementia, we have been very encouraged by the expressions of interest we have received from patients with other conditions too. A service that began in dementia care has been shown to have potential for hospital care much more broadly. ■

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