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ECU therapist studies links between scent and memory

GREENVILLE, NC (Oct. 18, 2005) — An East Carolina University recreational therapist is exploring links between scent, memory and well being in people with Alzheimer’s disease.

David Loy, a professor in the College of Health and Human Performance, received a \$20,919 grant this summer from ECU’s Division of Research and Graduate Studies to explore this link. Working with an aromatherapist and 13 long-term care facilities across North Carolina, Loy hopes the 20-week study will help improve the quality of life for those with Alzheimer’s disease and provide potential alternatives to psychotropic medications.

“People are looking for ways to help their clients. It helps individuals and it helps the staff and their ability to care for them,” Loy said. “We think it might be a nice, non-pharmacological way to improve the quality of life for people who have Alzheimer’s.”

In 2003, Loy met aromatherapist Jackie Farnell at a regional recreational therapy conference and learned of her success helping people with Alzheimer’s in long-term care facilities with their appetite loss and aggressive behavior. Farnell, of South Carolina, said scent is the strongest link to memory and can stimulate natural development of deficient chemicals in the brain.

“When people smell things, they are linked immediately and unconsciously to the past,” she said. “When you take a vitamin or an essential oil, it is made up of the same molecules as the body. It uses what it needs and the rest is eliminated.”

The study enables Loy to look at how appetite and moods are affected by the scents. To stimulate appetite, a scent mixture of grapefruit and clove is sprayed on patients’ bibs before mealtime. A scent mixture of grapefruit and frankincense is used to help curb the so-called Sundown symptoms, such as anger and sadness, that often occur during the early evenings.

Participants who receive one scent do not receive the other scent. A third scent, a mix of rosemary and orange, is offered to caregivers and staff to help ease stress and stimulate creativity. In the past, Farnell said she has seen dozens of people helped by the aromas and hopes even more will be helped through this study.

“These scents release serotonin and endorphins and can decrease depression and pain in the brain,” she said. “If people are more alert, it decreases falls. And because people are feeling better, they sleep better, which makes them sturdier on their feet during the day.”

Mary Knapp, 90, a resident at Beverly Health Care, is one of the dozens of participants in Loy’s study. Each day she wears on her sweater a heart-shaped patch scented with frankincense and grapefruit. Knapp described the scent as “mellow.”

Knapp’s daughter, Mary Langston, of Greenville, said she has noticed a marked change in the past few weeks in her mother’s attention span and ability to better remember relatives in photographs and scrapbooks.

“It’s been nice. It makes it so much easier to sit down and talk to her. As a child, you can’t imagine your parent’s not being able to remember things. But lately, it’s like she has been reborn,” Langston said. “She doesn’t get upset that she can’t remember things. Her attention span certainly has improved and she enjoys being around people more. Noises aren’t as disturbing for her.”

Beverly Health Care recreational therapist Amy Smith, who directs the study with nine patients at the care facility, said that keeping residents off medications helps them to be more alert and aware of their surroundings, and more willing to engage with others.

“I’m glad we did this. We weren’t sure what to expect and in a few weeks we’ve noticed, she (Mary) is different now,&rdqu