‘YOU’RE LOOKING WELL!’

Hairdressing is transforming the care of people with dementia, not just as a sensory and social experience but as a big boost to their self-esteem

By Jennifer Trueland
Visiting her mother in hospital some years ago, Jill Fraser noticed something different – she’d had her hair done for the first time since experiencing a major brain haemorrhage. It made all the difference in the world.

‘I just looked at her and thought: “that’s my mum”; she looked like herself again,’ says the former nurse and TV presenter. ‘I said: “Mum, you look amazing”, and she really did; it was fantastic for her, and for me as well.’

Ms Fraser founded the healthcare charity Kissing it Better (www.kissingitbetter.co.uk) which takes hairdressing and beauty students on to hospital wards to work with patients. But she is not alone in recognising the restorative value of having your hair done.

**Salon experience**

Researchers from the universities of Stirling and Manchester found that hair care plays an important role in the care of people with dementia – and hope that their findings will be taken on board in care homes and hospital wards across the country.

‘There’s a compelling argument for raising the profile of care-based hairdressing and its contribution to living well with dementia,’ says University of Stirling senior lecturer in dementia studies Richard Ward.

‘What we found is that hair care – and the whole salon experience – has a very valuable role to play,
and should be given greater prominence both in health and social care policy and dementia care practice.’

The Hair and Care Project (thehairandcareproject.wordpress.com/posts), based in a number of care environments in north west England, looked at 4 main areas: exploring the experience of hairdressing for people with dementia; examining the workplace experience of care-based hairdressers and the perspectives of care workers; scrutinising and documenting the constituent elements of hairdressing sessions; and considering the patterns of provision, access and affordability of hairdressing services in different types of dementia care settings.

Social experience

Researchers found that hairdressing had a positive effect on people with dementia, in part because it was a good sensory experience and they enjoyed the touch and one-to-one care. But also because appearance was an important part of people’s sense of ‘self’.

The researchers also found that how a person looked was important for their relationship with loved ones. Many couples managed appearance jointly and this became a more ‘intensely shared enterprise’ after a diagnosis of dementia.

The social experience of the salon, which could give rise to reminiscence and other positive cues, was another important benefit.

‘The salon has always been a place where people share stories,’ explains Dr Ward.

‘The trust has supported us all the way’

A new salon has opened its doors at the entrance of Warwick Hospital, offering hair and beauty services to patients, visitors and staff. Part of a project by the charity Kissing it Better, services are provided by hair and beauty students from Warwickshire College.

‘In the salon we have a dedicated space that gives people respite from the ward environment,’ says the college manager Carole Richardson.

‘The trust has been brilliant,’ she says. ‘They’ve seen the value in it and supported us all the way.’

Salon equipment was sponsored by a company called Salon Services.

Patients have to meet criteria – drawn up by nursing staff – to be able to use the salon. They have to be fully dressed in day clothes, be able to transfer themselves and not have any infections or be at risk of collapse. The salon charges £10 for a cut, £4 for a gent’s trim, and £5.50 for a shampoo and set.

‘We’ve had a huge range of patients of all ages,’ says Ms Richardson. She recalls a patient, a man in his forties, who had been through a ‘catalogue of disasters’. ‘His mum told us a couple of days later that he was looking so much better after the hair cut that they were sending him home.’

She would like to see the concept extended to other hospitals and care settings. South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust director of nursing Helen Lancaster has been a keen supporter of the project. ‘Feeling like yourself is essential for any recovery, and something as simple as having your hair or nails done can help this.’
of view, the researchers found there was consensus that appearance plays an important part in the lives of people with dementia – and some believe that standards of appearance can be an indicator of the wider quality of care on offer.

Sarah Campbell, research associate with the dementia and ageing research team at Manchester University School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, says: ‘Hair care is more than just about dignity; it is about selfhood and identity. Supporting people to uphold this can be therapeutic and help them feel good.’

‘Hair care is about more than just dignity – it is therapeutic and makes the person feel good’
Sarah Campbell

Hair care and grooming matter to male patients too, adds Ms Campbell, who says that getting the shaving routine right for each individual is important.

For Ms Fraser, good hair care and paying attention to patients’ appearance is part of the essence of nursing.

‘True nursing’
‘It doesn’t matter if you’re 85 with dementia or 16, having your hair done is energising,’ she says. ‘It’s the one-to-one attention, the feeling that you look like yourself again. For me, it’s real nursing: anyone can deliver drugs [to patients] but nursing should be about nurturing people,’ she says. ‘This is true nursing – it’s nurture of the whole family.’

Sarah Campbell, research associate with the dementia and ageing research team at Manchester University School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, gives her tips for nursing staff.

» Build hair care into regular routines to provide health-promoting, feel-good experiences for patients and residents. There are lots of opportunities for touch and promoting sensory well-being in a hair salon – from the shampoo and head massage to the final dressing and hair brushing.

» Some people with dementia may not like the sensation of water. Strategies to deal with this include using a type of funnel to direct water away from the client or the use of waterproof ponchos.

» If possible, set aside a relaxing ‘salon space’ for clients.

» Appearance-related work and giving the patient the opportunity to see themselves in a mirror can trigger conversations about how someone used to look or looks now, and can be a positive aspect of caregiving and getting to know someone better.

» Complimenting residents and patients on their appearance and hair can lead to positive care interactions and help people feel better about themselves.

The Kissing it Better charity helps establish links between hospitals and local colleges so that hair and beauty students have regular sessions on wards (properly supervised) to carry out hand and arm massages, hairdressing (using shampoo caps) and manicures.

The charity has also opened a hair salon at Warwick Hospital (see page 20) that has turned out to be popular and successful. Carole Richardson, who worked as a hairdresser for many years before taking a teaching, then management role at Warwickshire College, says there is a real buzz about the ward when the college students are there.

‘It’s great for relatives – they see that Mum has had her hair done and know that someone has been spending one-to-one time with their loved one. You cannot put a price on that.’

Jennifer Trueland is a freelance journalist

A student hairdresser styles the hair of a care home resident – and shares a laugh too

FAST FACT
£5.50
Cost of a shampoo and set in the salon at Warwick Hospital