Stimulation aids dementia care

MULTI-SENSORY stimulation (MSS) and structured activity sessions run by nurses can have a dramatic and positive effect on older people who have dementia, researchers have found.

The study at Dorset Healthcare NHS Trust involved 50 patients with moderate or severe dementia who were assigned to receive either MSS or an activity session over a four-week period.

In the MSS sessions, patients received the stimulation on a one-to-one basis with a nurse or psychology assistant. The structured activity typically involved dealing with a specific task, such as doing a jigsaw or arranging flowers.

‘Both MSS and activity sessions had immediate, significant benefits for patients,’ the researchers write in the British Journal of Clinical Psychology. ‘They were less bored, spoke spontaneously, related to others better and were more alert and attentive to their environment.’

Patients who received MSS continued to show improvements in mood and behaviour when they went home, although those attending activity sessions did not.

The researchers added that using a designated MSS environment could help problems caused by under-stimulation of patients with dementia and create a better environment for patients and staff.

PATIENTS IN the West Midlands will be able to seek advice from nurses via their digital televisions in two new pilot projects launched this month.

Telewest has been commissioned to pilot a digital interactive healthcare service, ‘Living Health’, to allow patients to book GP appointments and consult nurses through their sets.

The channel will also provide access to information currently available on the NHS Direct website, in addition to audio and video clips about healthy lifestyles.

Health minister Gisela Stuart said the move signified the ambition of the health service to explore digital TV as a means of delivering information directly into people’s homes.

The government hopes to roll out the scheme across England as more patients have access to digital television.

Nurse retraining is pivotal to resident relocation plan

NURSE TRAINING must be overhauled if government plans to end long-stay care for people with learning disabilities is to succeed, say nurse leaders in the field.

By 2004, accommodation for the remaining 1,500 residents of long-stay care homes for people with learning disabilities in England must close, the government announced in a White Paper, Valuing People, last week.

Under the proposals, learning disability nurses will work as key co-ordinators to develop healthcare plans for people who are moved into the community.

It is part of a £100 million drive over the next two years to improve access to education and full-time employment for people with learning disabilities. Less than 10 per cent of this sector of the population are in paid employment – an ‘unacceptable figure’, according to ministers.

However, health minister John Hutton said it is vital for nurses to meet their physical and mental health needs if the government’s strategy is to prove successful.

‘Helping people with learning disabilities to live as independently as possible within their local communities is key to improving people’s lives,’ he argued.

‘The key principles of civil rights, independence, choice and inclusion lie at the heart of our proposals and will impact on the work of the health sector,’ continued Mr Hutton.

To combat the disproportionate physical and mental health problems of people with learning disabilities, nurses must co-ordinate healthcare plans for people living in the community, Mr Hutton told Nursing Standard.

RCN learning disability and policy adviser Colin Bescock said the white paper represented a ‘watershed’ in nursing care for people with learning disabilities.

‘Our raison d’être in the past has been to work with clients in residential settings. Learning disability nurses now have to focus on improving the quality of life of their client group living in the community.

‘We need a re-orientation of learning disability training to allow recruits to the profession to take on a new role.’

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities said Valuing People presented a major opportunity to effect real change but was concerned that the available resources will limit action at local level. ‘With services that have been underfunded for so long, and a huge unmet need, there is a substantial shortfall,’ it said.

Valuing People can be found on www.doh.gov.uk/learningdisabilities. See perspectives page 23

Health advice via digital TV

1,500 residents with learning disabilities to move into the community by 2004

Exercise helps prevent falls

OLDER PEOPLE who follow exercise programmes delivered by district nurses are less likely to fall at home, a research study in New Zealand has concluded.

A group of 121 people aged over 75 received a programme of muscle strengthening and balance retraining exercises, while a similar group of 119 people did not.

Over a year, the numbers of falls in the group that had received the exercise was 46 per cent lower than in the group that had not.

The researchers at Otago Medical School found that not only was the reduction in falls beneficial, the New Zealand health service saved more than £500 for each fall prevented.