

Script – Print – Providing Comfort to Dementia Patients Doll Therapy Now Being Used as a Calming Influence

Dementia impacts more than 50 million people in the world, and that number is expected to double every 20 years. It's the leading cause of disability and dependency among the elderly population.

People with dementia often struggle with emotional responses. They may overreact to situations, experience mood changes and appear indifferent to things that used to give them pleasure.

That's where doll therapy can help. Like art or music therapy, doll therapy can be a calming influence to people who are experiencing anxiety, anger or a number of other emotions.

"Doll therapy is a distraction intervention," says Wayne Laramie, chief nursing officer for OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "It's providing a doll that's lifelike, to a patient who is experiencing dementia, where they can be agitated, confused, restless, sleepless, and it comforts them, and reminds them of whether they've been a parent or a grandparent. Just that rocking, caring and thinking about somebody else really is therapeutic. That's doll therapy."

Doll therapy has long been used in long-term and skilled nursing facilities to provide comfort to dementia patients. Now, hospitals are following suit. OSF HealthCare, for example, offers doll therapy in three of its hospitals – OSF Saint Anthony Medical Center in Rockford, OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria and OSF St. Joseph Medical Center in Bloomington.

"Doll therapy is something new for inpatient acute care," says Laramie. "So you assess those who might be eligible for it, and you try it out. You literally introduce the doll to them, and they either take to it or they don't. One way or the other, it's okay. Men and women are successful and impacted just the same - 85% of men and women who were introduced with a doll who have dementia. It's effective, and it's not gender specific."

Doll therapy could also help decrease the rate of patients who fall while in the hospital. In 2018, OSF Saint Anthony conducted a pilot study on a medical/surgical unit that included 35 patients with dementia. The study found that patients who had a doll had zero falls compared to the control group that had a 10% fall rate.

"Many times they tried to get up out of bed and they don't want to do that when they're holding a baby because they will fall and harm the baby. So they literally will put on a call light to say they need to go to the bathroom," says Laramie. "Or when they get up they don't stand and start walking, they wait for somebody to come or they are very careful with how they're walking because they don't want to drop a baby or fall. So far, I can tell you it's been very successful: of all the babies we've given out we've had zero falls in that population and traditionally that's one of our highest fall groups with the most injuries."

To avoid any concern about possible infection, patients can keep the dolls and take them home or to a nursing facility. Both Caucasian and Black dolls are available, as are boys and girls.

Hospital staff work closely with the patients to assure they are treated with dignity and not like a child simply because a doll is involved. Laramie says it's also important to family members to be upfront with the patients that the dolls are not real.

“Doll therapy, we know is beneficial,” adds Laramie. “We know that we have tried it on many patients already in just a short period of time. What we see from patients and what we hear from family is both eye opening and rewarding. Families have said things to us like this is another option that wasn't available before. They are impressed as to how calm and how it makes a difference. Many of them were skeptical to begin with, but once they see the results, it almost brings them to tears.”