



Just an old, sweet song

Tina Broad talks to music therapist Annette Baron, who drew late-stage dementia patients out of isolation with tunes from the past

When Melbourne music therapist Annette Baron presented staff at a large aged-care nursing home in the Eastern suburbs of Victoria with a video she recorded of their patients, no one was prepared for its transformative effect for the unit.

The ‘stars’ of Baron’s video were six women, aged 80 – 100, with late-stage dementia. Like many people in the advanced stages of the disease the women were withdrawn, felt isolated, couldn’t walk or speak, and required round-the-clock care.

She taped the six residents’ responses to 10-minute music therapy sessions over four days to see whether music had a positive impact on interaction levels. Baron either sang familiar songs from their past – such as *Lily Marlene*, *Daisy, Daisy*, *You are my sunshine* and *My bonny lies over the ocean* – or did vocal improvisations in which she echoed the residents’ vocalisations and matched their breathing through singing

minimal movement in over 10 years and here she was on the video, turning her head in the direction of my singing,” says Baron. “The nurses were utterly overwhelmed.”

The response from staff was a change in communication procedures. “They’re talking to them much more. They’re just so much more aware of respecting the patients’

emotional needs, as well as the physical side of things, and that has to have a profound impact on the quality of life for these residents.”

The study arose from Baron’s observations of the lack of services for older adults with late-stage dementia, even though many survive for years at this advanced stage, and



Annette Baron

can definitely see responsiveness that might otherwise be overlooked.

“When you’re a busy nurse and you’re working with advanced dementia patients, it’s easy to miss the subtleties of responses. I know many carers who believe that older adults with advance-stage dementia can’t respond to any interaction and definitely can’t initiate any. But, in my

experience, this is not true. Improvised singing and familiar songs can reach an individual who may seem unresponsive. That’s certainly been my message to my nursing colleagues. The video was a great dramatic tool in supporting my case.”

Baron’s findings have implications for other health professionals working in the area of aged care, such as general practitioners, occupational and lifestyle therapists. “There’s even potential for home-based carers and family members to use vocal improvisation and singing of favourite and familiar songs as a way of maintaining some kind of connection with their loved ones, right to the end.

“Music is just about the last memory to go. Not only that, music is a universal tool which everyone has a connection with in some way or other.”

Music. Play for Life is the Music Council of Australia national campaign to encourage more Australians to make music. In a regular series, *arts + medicine* will present a music therapy case study demonstrating the link between music and wellbeing.

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Music is just about the last memory to go

and improvised melodic motifs. The secondary aim of the study, funded by the Gerontology Foundation of Australia, was to find which method most suited the individual.

Significant responses Annette elicited from the women during her therapy sessions included vocalising, turning of the head towards or away from the source of sound, raising and lowering of the head and sustained eye contact.

Though the research sample was small, Annette found a marginal increase in the level of responses among participants to the familiar songs rather than vocal improvisation. But she is quick to point out that both methods have their place in reaching an individual who is unresponsive.

“One particular resident had displayed

the lack of verbal communication extended to these residents by nursing staff and even family members.

“A lot of carers of adults with late-stage dementia attend very well to the patients’ physical needs, but don’t give so much thought to emotional, verbal and vocal interactions with them. On one level I guess that’s understandable. If your resident is stage seven on the Reisberg Global Deterioration Scale and has a Mini Mental State Examination Score of zero, you’re not going to get a lot of response in the form of verbal communication.

“By talking and singing to these residents, though the responses may be minimal, they are still significant. The important thing is that, if you’re attuned to the signs and subtle cues, you