Psychosocial research in dementia: past, present and future

Henry BRODATY

Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing, University of New South Wales, Australia

Psychosocial research covers a broad canvas examining the influence of psychological, social and environmental factors on individuals’ physical, mental, social and functional wellbeing and that of their care partners.

Interventions for the person with dementia such as reminiscence therapy, cognitive stimulation therapy, cognitive rehabilitation and physical exercise have variously improved cognition, quality of life, socialisation and physical fitness, although evidence is modest and benefits short-lived.

For carers, early psychosocial research demonstrated negative effects such as depression, stress, strain, social isolation and poorer physical health. Subsequent intervention studies reported it was possible to reduce carers’ psychological morbidity and maintain care recipients with dementia at home longer with cost savings.

Behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia have been a richly rewarding area for investigation with a number of measurement scales developed, aetiological formulations and successful interventions to reduce depression, agitation and aggression. Interventions include music and the arts, person centred care, problem solving, caregiver training, environmental design and innovative models of community and residential care.

Current and future directions of psychosocial research encompass a ‘re-abling’ approach to assist people diagnosed with dementia to live fulfilling lives, reduction of community and professional stigma, dementia-friendly communities and hospitals, better models of community care, innovative models of residential care, lifestyle interventions to prevent cognitive decline and e-health interventions as the baby boomers move into the higher risk bracket for dementia.

The quantity, quality and rigour of psychosocial research in dementia has been increasing and is leading better lives for people living with dementia and those close to them. A major challenge is encouraging their uptake and translation into practice.