

IMPROVING GERIATRIC CARE IN SCOTLAND

Working in geriatric care, attending further education classes and helping to develop new quality standards in care homes, whilst managing a family and a household, sounds like an impossible list of tasks to reconcile. However, thanks to its Virtual College the Work-Life Adaptability Partnership (WAP) makes this possible.

Led by the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health of Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) and supported by this University's School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences, [WAP](#) has forged a partnership of organisations including private sector care homes for the elderly, the Quality Improvement Scotland initiative of the National Health Service, the Queen's Nursing Institute and NGOs like Age Concern Scotland and Help the Aged. The Virtual College is providing training for care workers and creating a Community of Practice that will enhance working conditions and the quality of care for older people. The participants are located throughout Scotland in both rural and urban areas.

A FLEXIBLE APPROACH FOR DIFFERENT GROUPS OF LEARNERS

WAP is targeting registered nurses and also care workers with low or no formal qualifications. It seeks to accommodate the needs of members of care staff, who are at a disadvantage because they live in remote areas or because rotating shift work makes it impossible for them to take part



in regular training. The approach takes account of the facts that the majority of these women have family responsibilities and that most of the care workers who lack formal qualifications or up-to-date vocational skills are older women. The DP is also reaching out to unemployed and economically inactive women who may have considerable lay experience of caring for family members and could benefit from the careers guidance provided by the Virtual College either in terms of re-entering the job market or changing careers.

A total of 39 so-called "link-nurses" - from as far north as the Shetland Isles to the Borders region in the south of Scotland - were recruited at the launch of the project, but thanks to active networking the number of the DPs' beneficiaries has been growing ever since.

ACCOMMODATING INDIVIDUAL WAYS OF LEARNING

The Virtual College enables care workers to study in a virtual environment that offers almost all the experiences and benefits of traditional university or college courses whilst permitting the individual to remain at work. Apart from virtual drop-in classes, individual tutor support and peer group support systems have been made available. Access to subject and practice experts is time tabled to meet the participant's needs and online sessions are scheduled to suit her family, employment and other life commitments. Synchronous (real time) communication and interaction systems are an important element of the Virtual College, as they provide immediate feedback and stimulus. In addition, the provision of asynchronous (time independent) strategies allows participants to access the system components twenty-four hours a day and this enables them to learn in their own time and at their chosen pace. Access to the Virtual College is restricted to registered users who can log on from work or home-based workstations or any web browser. However, it is recognised that face-to-face contact is still an important element in training and education, and so study camps are organised twice a year, at GCU.

The initial objective of many of the participants is to obtain a degree or a diploma but others simply wish to take part and to feel empowered by the experience of the learning without the pressure of working for a qualification. However, when and if they feel they want to obtain credit, their work can be validated towards degree level study.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING

A big problem for workers who want to enhance standards and make changes in care homes and other National Health Service facilities is that they often feel isolated and doubt whether they alone have the ability to engender change. This is exacerbated by the fact that they often work in settings where staff shortages are the norm and there is little money to invest in staff development. "In addition", says Debbie Tolson, Professor of Gerontological Nursing at [Glasgow Caledonian University](#), "in Scotland, nurses can live such a long way from fellow specialists that interaction can be problematical. The nurses involved in our initiative, who are committed to high quality care of older people, can now talk to each other and meet and use the project resources to work collaboratively and to pool their skills." This is what is happening in the [Communities of Practice](#), which are networks of learners from nursing and unqualified care staff who share a common work plan. The aim is to develop a practitioner-based model for practice and to agree the values that should underpin care. Collaboratively the groups design and test best practice guidance within a Demonstration Site and then implement the results in the homes or hospitals in which they work. This process is an e-facilitated blend of knowledge management, innovative learning and practice development that takes place in a managed learning environment provided by the Virtual College.

Care homes are used as Demonstration Sites to provide a base for testing ideas and producing learning materials, including film footage. These demonstration homes are equipped with extra computers to give all the staff and residents access to the Virtual College. Care workers, in particular, benefit from the College's learning resources and the use of its electronic library. Older people enjoy the interactivity of e-mail and the web and using their newly acquired IT skills. All members of staff have access to identical resources, but WAP goes into greater depth with those who are more experienced. Everybody contributes to evaluation and fact finding and in addition to the national Community, there are other Communities of Practice emerging in each participating care home. Cascading the training through more experienced staff and also the assistance provided by the Virtual College supports the learning process. For example, there is self-instructional material that includes multiple-choice questionnaires that staff can use to monitor their own learning and development.

A NEW STRATEGY TO DEVELOP BEST PRACTICE

In the UK, as in other countries, the provision of guidance for care professionals stems from the requirements of official monitoring and inspections procedures and from policy priorities promoting better quality of care. In terms of the care of the elderly, practitioners often feel that guidance from national agencies does not reflect their values and WAP has successfully piloted a [new approach](#) to the development and sharing of care guidance

This involves a process of collaboration between practitioners, academics, older people and policy agencies. Rather than beginning with the regulations stipulated by the relevant National Authority, members of this group draft something, which has become known as a Best Practice Statement. It is a mixture of research and science, practical know-how, what older people feel that they want or need and what nurses wish to deliver. It is also about the art of the possible, and so each statement is tested in real care settings and refined as the work proceeds. Eventually, after about a year, the National Health Service organises an external consultation to give a wider audience the chance to influence the new guidance tool. It is then published and widely disseminated in paper form and via the Internet. Through the Virtual College, WAP supports practitioners to implement the statement in their workplaces by providing audit tools and advice, based on the experience of the team who developed the statement and tested it in practice.

Within 5 months of the publication of the first statement concerned with promoting [nutrition for older people](#), a national survey reported that half of the care homes and hospitals included in the study were already changing their practices in response to this statement. Other Best Practice Statements are being developed on subjects such as depression and physical exercise.

TRANSFERRING GOOD PRACTICE TO OTHER ECONOMIC SECTORS

WAP is aiming to transfer its approach to other economic sectors and this is being facilitated through its transnational activities. The DP is member of the [ETNA Transnational Partnership](#) (TP) and has partners in Italy and Spain. ETNA focuses on the sustainable development of SMEs

and maintaining jobs in that type of enterprise, work-life-balances for women and men and establishing and consolidating access to the information society in disadvantaged urban and rural areas

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