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Reducing certain medications makes ‘huge difference’ for some dementia patients

By Patricia Kozicka Global News

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EDMONTON — Changes are being made to how patients with dementia are being treated thanks to the success of a recent Alberta Health Services pilot project.

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Allowing people with dementia to participate in activities connected to their past pursuits helps lessen behavioural issues, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority officials say. What you need to know about Vitamin D and Dementia

The project saw the use of antipsychotic drugs including Zyprexa, Seroquel, Risperdal and Haldol reduced at 11 long-term care facilities around the province. At St. Albert’s Youville Home, that meant going from having 66 residents on the medications to just five.

Staff say the differences they’ve since seen in their patients have been incredible.

“We’re seeing that the residents are coming alive,” said Covenant Health’s Chris North.

Yvonne Verlinde, 98, has dementia and makes repetitive noises. For that, she was on the antipsychotic medication Risperdal for years. Since being taken off the drug as part of the pilot project, her family has noticed major changes.

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“For many years, she needed assistance at every meal when eating or drinking. A few months ago, I was surprised to see that she could eat and drink by herself,” said her nephew Marcel Normandeau, who noticed other positive changes.

“On her 98th birthday she proceeded to read her birthday cards and thank all the persons individually — again, another surprise,” he added tearfully.

Dawn Gammon, a nurse practitioner at Youville, explains that antipsychotic drugs used to commonly be prescribed for behaviours related to dementia such as aggression, anxiety and sleep disorders.

“I think we thought antipsychotic medications treated dementia. They actually don’t.”

According to previous studies, antipsychotic medications are only effective 20 per cent of the time and increase the chances of a heart attack or stroke.

“They are very serious medications,” Gammon said. “They can cause aspiration pneumonia because people aren’t swallowing correctly…there is a big risk. And that’s why it should be a last resort, not a first resort.”

The focus has since shifted from a medication approach to a personalized one. In some cases, small changes such as moving bath times or letting patients sleep in or have an afternoon nap have made a huge difference.

“We’ve had a number of residents who are now enjoying what they enjoyed before — so playing the piano, knitting, recognizing their loved ones,” said North.

“It just changes people’s worlds to look at them as individuals and not to always look at a behaviour as just a behaviour,” Gammon added.

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Another side-effect of the pilot project: antipsychotic drug costs at the Youville Home have gone from $3,300 a month to $200 a month.

The initiative is now being rolled out to long-term care facilities across Alberta.

With files from Su-Ling Goh, Global News

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Patricia Kozicka

Web Producer

Patricia is an online producer at Global Edmonton. She's been with the station for just over six years, and loves that no two days are ever the same.