What impact might the restrictive design of Aged Care Facilities have on the quality of life of people with dementia?

This is one of the key questions in a new research project looking at how we support freedom of movement and high quality accommodation for people living with dementia within residential aged care facilities (RACFs).

UTS Law’s Dr Linda Steele is co-ordinating the project which is funded by the Dementia Research Foundation.

Dr Steele says in most RACFs, people living with dementia are separated in locked facilities with limited access to outdoor spaces and the wider community.

“This ‘congregation, segregation and confinement’ has long been accepted practice but it is possible that the built environment of these facilities is harmful for people living with dementia.”

The current Royal Commission into Aged Care is focussing on practices within care facilities such as staff ratios, chemical and physical restraint, physical and sexual assault, medical neglect, poor nutritional content in food, and failure to provide basic items of necessity.

The project team wants to ensure that the effects of the built environment are also considered.

Research project member Professor Richard Fleming from the University of Wollongong says the actual design of buildings has a significant impact on the living conditions within aged care facilities.

‘We can make all the changes in the world to what staff do in aged care facilities, but if we don’t take a serious look at the buildings themselves we run the very real risk of people living in spaces that are themselves, by design, depleting their quality of life’. 
The project will use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a framework through which to view the restrictive environment of RACFs segregation as an injustice to dementia residents.

International dementia rights advocate Kate Swaffer says most care providers restrict people with dementia’s personal movement and access to all areas of society, and further segregate them from the rest of the community including other residents.

“This means that the physical environment provided in residential care is a significant human rights issue for people living with dementia who are entitled to recognition of all their human rights, including the rights to non-discrimination, access all aspects of society on an equal basis with others including the physical environment, liberty of movement and personal mobility.”

The research will explore a range of questions including:

- why do we house people living with dementia in large numbers separate to the rest of the community and most often separate to residents without dementia?
- why do we have buildings that lock up people living with dementia and prevent them from accessing the community?
- what impact does this have on people living with dementia and the overall diversity and vibrancy of our communities as a whole?

The project team will convene forums in Wollongong and Sydney on May 14 and 15 to bring together people living with dementia, care partners, aged care facility workers, dementia advocates, and aged care regulators for focus group discussions.

Participants will be encouraged to discuss their experiences and share their knowledge, personal experiences and perspectives.

Once completed, the research will form the basis of a submission to the Royal Commission to ensure that human rights and the built environment are part of the inquiry.

The overall goal is to develop more inclusive and accessible communities for people living with dementia.

Project details:

Project Title: Safe and Just Futures for People Living with Dementia in Residential Aged Care
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