

Early in 1990 a process of lateral thinking began in Dublin. While working as a Speech and Language therapist in the west of Ireland at a centre for children and young people with learning difficulties, it became obvious to me that music was an effective way of reaching people with more severe and profound handicaps.

Already a system was being devised; its main thrust was to activate potential for communication based on the development of pre-verbal skills: interaction, motivation to communicate, listening so as to develop comprehension, any kind of pre-verbal output whether vocal or gestural, imitation and turn-taking. Colleagues began to suggest the possibility of packaging this system, but problems arose out of the fact that there are so many different ages and levels of learning difficulty to be catered for.

At a human, social level it became obvious to me that very many elderly people in long-stay establishments were being cared for physically and medically but their psychosocial and emotional needs were not being addressed. Those with dementia, in particular, would sit for hours in day rooms, staring into space. The thought occurred to me, that the approach being used for learning difficulties could be adapted to improve the quality of life for these people too.

Having shared this insight with others, the next step was to implement the idea. This meant compiling a 45-minute group programme on tape and experimenting with it in three different settings in Dublin, both geriatric and psychogeriatric. The outcomes were positive, both for patients and staff, who appreciated this breakthrough in their own efforts to communicate with patients with dementia.

The suggestion to package the system came this time from a Director of Services responsible for adults with psychiatric problems. So followed a pilot study lasting for a year, and in October 1991 the first workshop was held in Dublin.

The name Sonas (pronounced "sunus") is an Irish word meaning well-being, joy, contentment. The approach's aim is to activate potential



Mary Threadgold, speech and language therapist, is the author of the Sonas approach.

Touching the soul through the senses

The Sonas approach is a tried and tested way of activating potential for communication in people with dementia, through all the senses including touch, smell and taste. Mary Threadgold explains the system and how it was developed.

for communication, thereby enriching quality of life. The whole area of impoverished social interaction for people with dementia or other disabilities is well covered in the literature. For example Erber (1994) makes a strong case for intervention in terms of facilitating communication for the institutionalised elderly person.

Between October 1991 and the end of June 1995, 78 training workshops aimed at introducing staff and helpers to a new form of social interaction will have been held throughout Ireland, north and south as well as eight workshops in England (Leeds and Sussex as well as Middlesex). Over 1,400 people have attended these basic three-hour training workshops, and the Sonas project continues to expand and develop. A Sonas kit containing two professional audiotapes and a manual, is only made available to people who have attended a Sonas workshop as the system needs to be explained and demonstrated in order to be used effectively.

Networking

In December 1991, several colleagues from Belfast attended a Dublin workshop. This was the beginning of an association which has added a significant dimension to the project both in terms of input, promoting Sonas throughout the north of Ireland (by running workshops regularly in Belfast), and through cross-border collaboration at a time when this was diffi-

cult. We have continued to meet two or three times a year during the past three years and are in constant telephone communication. This association has also been multidisciplinary, since the two Belfast representatives include an activity nurse and a speech and language therapist. It should also be noted that when the representatives – Rosemary Hamill and Bobby Dixon – submitted an entry on the use of Sonas at the Belfast City Hospital for the 3M *Nursing Times* award, they were short-listed and invited to London for the awards ceremony. Although they were not the overall winners in their particular section, they enjoyed the occasion and valued the opportunity to share their experience of Sonas with others.

For Rosemary and Bobby, Sonas came to their attention at a time when they were serving on a committee set up in the Elderly Care Unit of Belfast City Hospital, to look at the day of the long-stay patient, with a view to improving its quality. One highlighted issue was the difficulty in communication with patients when conventional means did not appear to be effective. Communication was defined as the transference of thoughts, ideas, desires, feelings, opinions etc from one to another in many different ways, not only by the spoken or written word. It was pointed out that all non-verbal means of communication such as body language, facial expression, gesture and touch, play a very important part.

The Elderly Care Unit had already attempted to introduce music on two occasions. In the first instance the visiting worker queried the value of what he was doing because of the patients' apparent lack of response. This problem was also encountered by a retired nursing sister who came to the unit as a volunteer. Once Sonas was introduced to the unit it was found to be of benefit to both patients and staff.

How it works

The Sonas approach is multi-sensory, with a variety of activities to stimulate all the senses: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory. The 45-minute audiotape programme, incorporating music and singing, is conducted in a group setting. For the group session, up to eight participants sit in a horseshoe shape where they can see the leader and the session proceeds as follows:

- Signature tune and greeting song
- Gentle Keep Fit exercises (the sense of smell is included)
- A "singalong" which includes three songs
- Relaxing music/massage (including sense of taste)
- Lively music/dancing/percussion
- Joining in proverbs/listening to poetry
- Participants' own "party pieces", or
- Reminiscence
- Second singalong
- Closing song and signature tune.

The convenience of the tape frees the staff for full participation within the group and enables them to give specific assistance to the more dependent members. A maximum of eight elderly people is recommended for any particular group, and the group is run by a leader and helper. It is important that the same eight people stay in their own group (as far as possible) because Sonas is not a form of entertainment, rather an interactional experience where familiarity adds to a sense of group membership and belonging.

Development

Sonas continues to grow and develop. There is now an individual as well as a



Sister Mary Threadgold: "It occurred to me that the approach we were using for people with learning difficulties could be adapted to improve the quality of life for elderly people with dementia."

group session available within the programme. This involves music and the sense of touch. Writing on the sense of touch as a means of communication, Ashley Montague states, "Probably by pressure, intensity, rhythm, duration, firmness, etc...infants are able to discriminate between those who, when holding them, care for them and those who do not" (Montague 1978).

Elsewhere in his book he says: "In old age...when the person becomes so much dependent upon others for

6 Sonas is an Irish word, meaning well-being, joy, contentment. Both the group and the individual programme involve all the senses, especially music and – so important and so neglected – the sense of touch ?

human support, he needs embraces, an arm around his shoulder, to be taken by the hand...and given the opportunity to respond. Yet this is where we fail the ageing quite miserably – as we do in so much else. The most important and neglected need is

for tactile stimulation – an experience necessary for their well-being." (Ibid)

We have worked out a simple massage sequence which focuses on the shoulders, back of the neck and the back area, as well as incorporating part of the Metamorphic Technique,¹ relating to the hands and head. The Sonas approach to massage is based on the following principles:

1. Touch is therapeutic.
2. Giving individual quality time to an elderly person is therapeutic.
3. Using a technique where there is predictability is a comfort and thus therapeutic.
4. The relaxation which is usually the result of touch is particularly therapeutic.

Evaluation

The question could be asked: in what way have we evaluated the effectiveness of the Sonas approach? By using a very broad-based questionnaire in the early stages we found that people

- Physically became more aware of their surroundings: they were more inclined to take initiative, to join in clapping etc; they became less passive and less drowsy;
- Socially became more aware of other group members: they used better eye contact and showed more interest in people;
- Emotionally enjoyed the session, relaxed and smiled more, and participated in the activities;
- Intellectually anticipated to a greater extent: they made associations, memories were triggered and some people made spontaneous remarks.

Further efforts were made to gather useful information but the analysis of this tends to be inconclusive so far. Rosemary, Bobby and I are aware of the difficulties of finding scientific evidence for outcomes which are qualitative rather than quantitative; it is difficult but not impossible. We will have to wait

¹. The full Metamorphic Technique involves a light massage on the feet, hands and head. It was devised during the 1960s by Robert St John who has worked with reflexology but decided to find a holistic approach that differed from reflexology, focusing only on the spinal reflex areas of feet, hands and head. The technique is simple to learn and to implement. (Saint-Pierre, Gaston, Shapiro 1982)

until we can afford a professional researcher before moving on to the stage of finding conclusive proof of the effectiveness of this approach.

In an article written in 1967, Bower considers the organic and psychogenic factors in dementia. He suggests that:

“Whereas the organic changes and concomitant alteration in behaviour are essentially irreversible, the psychogenic components of the dementing process are, at least in the early phase of the disease process, reversible.” (Bower 1967)

Bower sees this psychogenic factor essentially as a form of sensory deprivation, and proposes that “persistent sensory stimulation and the creation of an enriched environment are acceptable therapeutic tools” in the management of dementia. He also points out that “stimulation of patients who are old and becoming demented, to be therapeutically effective, must be consistent and of long duration”. We see the Sonas approach as a valid, long-term way of providing both sensory stimulation and an enriched environment, and therefore a way of slowing down the dementing process.

Conclusion

The Sonas network is expanding and developing. A Special Interest Group has been formed which meets twice or three times a year. Quarterly newsletters are available to subscribers. Funding is being sought in order to set up a permanent office which would function in its own right, thereby ensuring continuity. It has become obvious that Sonas is not only innovative but that it particularly helps to fill an obvious gap in services for the most vulnerable elderly people whose ability to communicate is so limited that they are unable to voice their need for interactional exchanges.

Local workshops can be arranged on request. Enquiries welcome, to Sr Mary Threadgold, The Sonas Office, 38 Belvedere Place, Dublin 1. Tel/Fax: 003531 8366874.

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