

Just Checking: lessons three years on

Celia Price and colleagues share lessons from the first years of using the Just Checking monitoring system

Alzheimer's cafes, services for BME communities and services for people with early onset dementia. In addition Professor Heun of Birmingham University has encouraged colleagues to become associated with his research programme. This could be a very significant development, bringing together the academic research expertise and contacts of the university with the enthusiasm and clinical experience of practitioners providing services to a wide population.

These meetings have demonstrated the benefits of a network and we hope this will stimulate colleagues to explore this or alternative models in other regions. A national network may follow, based in clinical service, but offering rich opportunities for audit and research.

References

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It is three years since Just Checking was developed as a portable activity monitoring system for people with dementia, living in their own homes. Just Checking is now being used by some 65 local authorities and mental health trusts throughout the UK for assessment and care planning. So what have we learned about people with dementia who are living alone, and how we can best support them so that they retain their independence for as long as possible? We are a group of practitioners working in health and social care who have used the Just Checking system and we thought it would be helpful to share our experiences. This is not a formal research study – simply some observations and reflections on what this means for good practice in social care.

People living with early to moderate dementia are generally managing better than expected in their own homes. When people with dementia are able to remain in their familiar environment this helps them to function better. Similarly supporting someone to return home from hospital or respite (where memory problems can be exacerbated by unfamiliar surroundings) can help to reinstate routines and daily living patterns.

Wey (2006) reminds us that people exist within a social, cultural and historical context and their memories, skills and personhood do not exist in themselves but in their relationship with their environment. If someone has lived in a house for many years there are cues and reminders all around them that act as a catalyst for their behaviour and to help them make sense of their

What is Just Checking?

Just Checking is a portable activity monitoring system for people with dementia. Small wireless movement sensors are triggered as a person moves around their home. The movement data generates a chart of activity, which is accessed via a secure website. It does not involve the use of cameras. Professionals and family members can establish, for example, when a person:

- gets up, and whether they had a disturbed night
- visits the kitchen to prepare meals and drinks
- leaves the house and returns.

This information can then be used to make care arrangements better suited to the individual's needs and routines.

world. But in a risk-averse culture, practitioners may feel anxious about supporting a vulnerable person to return home.

Observations of how a person is using the space in their home throughout the 24-hour period is surprisingly powerful information.

An understanding of day- and night-time patterns allows us to plan care packages to best effect, and to gauge the effect of the services that are being provided. Sometimes we can see that home care visits are ill-timed and intrusive, with service users getting up to let home care in and returning to bed once they have gone. But we're usually looking for a general picture, not detailed information about the exact time someone entered the bathroom, how long they were

in there and what variance this was on the day before. Days vary. Weekdays are quite often different from weekends because of the interaction with other family members.

Older people are often more active than expected when alone in their own home.

"I thought she sat in a chair all day" family members will say. A person who is aware that they have memory problems may be careful not to show their vulnerability when a family member is present and may appear more passive than they really are. Our evidence seems to show that, when alone, the service user is back in control of their situation, and more able to carry out their daily activities as normal.

'Wandering' or 'leaving the home unsafely' is over-reported.

There is a tendency to concentrate on the negatives and put too much weight on occasional incidents without examining their frequency and severity. One-off incidents are reported as 'she is out every night', due to anxiety from neighbours, family members or professionals. Activity monitoring helps to counter neighbourhood rumours and subjective information from stressed relatives. It provides an objective indicator of behaviours – such as leaving the property at inappropriate times or leaving main doors open for extended periods – so that we can take a measured and appropriate response. It can help professionals review their practice, and begin to challenge more traditional risk-averse practices.

Sharing the activity data with family carers helps collabora-

tion, reassures families, and brings confidence in the care package.

Web-based activity monitoring can help defuse conflict within families if there are differing views of a relative's capabilities, and allows care to be shared across families, wherever they live. For example, a daughter who lived near her parent felt overwhelmed by having sole responsibility. Her brother who lived overseas felt frustrated at being unable to help. Using this type of monitoring system he was able to log on to see that activity was as expected, and to contact a neighbour if some-

The data must be kept simple, and seen only by those the person agrees should have access

thing seemed amiss. Both siblings benefited (reduction in stress levels for daughter, feeling better for being able to take part in the caring for the son), as did the parent who no longer felt such a burden to the daughter.

In shared housing schemes, people with memory problems sometimes become the scapegoat for all complaints.

Several local authorities have reported similar incidents where a tenant has been accused by other residents of being out at night and ringing doorbells, while the activity data showed that this person was not the perpetrator!

Activity monitoring gives people with dementia a new means to communicate their capabilities and real voice in the decision-making process.

Many people with dementia are unable to articulate much about their daily activities or identify how well they are coping. Far from being 'big brother' and controlling, activity monitoring can put more control in the hands of the person with dementia. For

people with early dementia the activity charts can be shared with the service user as a part of a rehabilitation programme. Ethical considerations are key (see references). Issues such as capacity are central to the use of any assistive technologies and the consent and involvement of the service user is sought as far as this is possible.

Putting it in context

The data needs to be kept simple, and viewed by only those who have an interest in the person and whom the person agrees should have access – community care practitioners, community mental health teams and supportive families. They are able to put the data in context, and to work in the person's best interests, to decide how best to support them so that they can remain in their own home – where they want to be – for as long as possible.

Reference

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For more on the ethical considerations of using assistive technology such as the Just Checking system, go to www.atdementia.org.uk or www.telecaremadeeasy.com

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