MEDIA RELEASE: 31 May, 2013

Reframing dementia care – expert calls for more ‘experts’

With estimates suggesting that up to one million Australians will experience a dementia by 2050, it is understandable that people are feeling anxious about the disease and the quality of care they, or a family member, are likely to receive.

A leading dementia researcher at the University of Wollongong (UOW), Associate Professor Victoria Traynor, believes that the quality of care that older people and individuals living with a dementia receive can be improved through better education and training.

Working in collaboration with Nicole Britten, from the UOW’s School of Nursing, Midwifery and Indigenous Health, Professor Traynor has developed an innovative resource to enable multi-disciplinary health practitioners, including psychologists, occupational therapists, dieticians, physiotherapists and social workers to assess their own level of competency in caring for people with a dementia.

Commissioned and funded by the NSW Ministry of Health and Family and Community Services (Ageing, Disability and Home Care NSW), the Dementia Care Competency Framework (DCCF) is a resource that shows these practitioners how to get from an ‘essential’ competency level in dementia care to an ‘expert’ level and help develop standards of practice for dementia care.

“The resource explains the type of care practitioners and managers should be delivering to a person with dementia – from diagnosis right through to end-of-life palliative care. It covers areas including physical activity programs, risk reduction strategies, depression, sexuality, younger onset dementia, environmental design and technology,” explains Professor Traynor.

More than 200 Australian and international dementia care practitioners and researchers were surveyed to develop the resource, which will be available as a free online tool by the end of 2013.

It will enable enrolled nurses, registered nurses, team leaders and allied health and medical practitioners to assess their existing level of competency based on 10 core competencies -- facilitating person-centred and ethical care, working with families/informal carers, understanding living with dementia, recognising dementia, effectively communicating, assuring diversity and inclusivity, implementing therapeutic activities, enabling the activities of daily living, promoting health and wellbeing and promoting a positive environment.

It describes ‘essential’, ‘enhanced’ and ‘expert’ practice in each of these areas, identifies the educational opportunities and experience required for each level of competency, helps the practitioner create an action plan and lists relevant resources.

“We are hoping that community, aged care and health managers will include these competencies in position descriptions for jobs and career planning,” Associate Professor Traynor says.
The NSW Ministry of Health is currently developing a strategy to implement the competency framework in the public health system. It will also be used as a teaching resource in the UOW’s School of Nursing, Midwifery and Indigenous Health.

* Associate Professor Traynor is involved in research across dementia, rehabilitation and aged care within the UOW’s Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health. She is Associate Director of the NSW/ACT Dementia Training and Study Centre, a member of the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute and an educator involved in training students enrolled in the UOW’s Bachelor of Nursing degree and post graduate courses in gerontology, rehabilitation studies and dementia care.

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About IHMRI

The Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI) is a joint initiative of the University of Wollongong and Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District.

IHMRI’s goal is to foster, support and grow health and medical research in the Illawarra by connecting and supporting academic and clinician researchers around research problems of relevance to the region and the world. IHMRI provides research leadership, coordination, infrastructure and facilities to more than 500 academic and clinical researchers throughout the Illawarra.