THE FEASIBILITY OF ENRICHING COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR PATIENTS WITH APHASIA: PERSPECTIVES OF VISITORS AND HOSPITAL STAFF

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Introduction
The benefits of enriched environments have been well documented in animal models. Limited information on the effects of an enriched environment in humans is available. Specifically, the concept of a communicatively enriched environment has not yet been explored.

We know:
- Principles of experience-dependent neuroplasticity can help the brain recover structurally and functionally after injury.
- Enriched environments can provide opportunities to practice experience-dependent neuroplasticity principles.
- In many cases, visitors spend large amounts of time with patients in hospital and are willing to be involved in their care.

Background
- Experience-dependent neuroplasticity: the brain’s ability to adapt and improve in response to experience (Kleim, Janssen, H., 2004).
- Communicative environments: environments that support communication (Laird, 2010).

Method
Participants
7 hospital visitors of patients with aphasia, 10 allied health & 4 nursing staff

Method of Data Collection and Analysis
Tick a box and line comment survey (visitors): Descriptive Statistics & qualitative content analysis
Focus Group Interviews (allied health & nursing staff): Qualitative content analysis

Research Questions and Results

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Were visitors willing to and capable of providing communicatively enriching activities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean or Frequency</th>
<th>SD or %</th>
<th>Range</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background in communication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background in technology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hours visited/day</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hours visited/week</td>
<td>15.04</td>
<td>13.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willing to bring items to talk about</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Why did visitors want to provide communicatively enriching activities?

- “We want to help dad regain as much as possible”.
- “For mum to achieve better verbal communication that will allow her less frustration she is experiencing now”.

What did participants see as potential benefits or barriers?

- The effect of emotions, feelings and attitudes towards enriching the communicative environment.
- The effect of the patient’s medical condition and level of functioning on enriching the communicative environment.
- Associated impairments:
  - “…they won’t purely just have aphasia, a lot of them may be in a wheelchair”.
  - “You’re not really sure whether they are saying something that makes sense”.
  - “Well we’re hoping to get them to improve their speech or their understanding I guess”.
- Practical considerations for enriching the communicative environment
  - Hospital related considerations: “Any extra thing you introduce into the room is obviously going to take more time, more therapy time”.
  - Patient and family considerations: “It’s education. It’s all well and good to put iPads in rooms, but if no one knows what to do with them, they’re not achieving anything really”.

Conclusions

- Visitor reports from this study suggest that some visitors may be able to provide communicatively enriching activities for people with aphasia.
- Allied health and nursing staff report that a communicatively enriched environment may be feasible providing that potential barriers are addressed.
- The limited number of survey responses may be due to only willing visitors participating.
- Therefore, a pilot study is necessary to accurately determine its feasibility.