

Living in a Dementia Unit: A View from the Inside

Jim Vanden Bosch

Daily journal: Day 4

Today I am aware how much I have come to know (as much as one can know from just a couple days of observing) and appreciate and care about many of the residents here. Let me introduce them (I will not use their real names):

- Howard is a jokester, and likes to clown around with staff. He tells me that he has a girlfriend here who is “sometimes ok and sometimes not.” He can communicate verbally but the content of his conversation is confused; he also says he has trouble knowing where to go here. He and I have developed some common rapport since we are both physically healthy and mobile. Whenever we meet in the hallway now, we roll our eyes at each other in an expression of mild agitation at the state of affairs in our lives.
- Lois is, I have come to see, the girlfriend of Howard. Today she brought him, somewhat surreptitiously it seemed, a plate of food covered in a napkin and then sat with him while he ate it. They are often together.
- Richard is in a wheelchair and often calls out “Nurse! Nurse!” He is mostly ignored by staff, probably because they have determined that he really is not in dire need of anything. He often tries to transfer himself from his wheelchair to a regular chair. This sets off his falls alarm and then a staff person usually—not always—comes along and either helps him into the other chair or tells him to stay in his wheelchair. I have heard him more than once complain that his back hurts, and one time he directly told an assistant that he wanted to sit in a regular chair because sitting “all day long” in his wheelchair hurts his back. He also lets out a healthy series of curses occasionally when things are not going his way.
- Janice is a tiny woman who has a child-like voice who can propel her wheelchair around nimbly with her feet. She prefers to eat at the small table next to the nurses’ station, rather than with others in the dining room, and she rarely interacts with other residents. She has been concerned yesterday and today about where her brown suit is. Staff have been telling her it will be coming in the batch of laundry either today or Monday.

- Mae is a pleasant woman with thick white hair. I had not seen her much, but today I was standing outside my room when she came by. She stopped and asked if I “knew anything about this phone situation.” When I said no and asked her to tell me about it, she said that her home phone numbers had been changed and now there was no way for her to communicate with either her husband or her parents, who lived just next door. “Did you ever see such craziness?” she said. She was concerned that her husband would not be able to find her when he came to take her home. She pointed out to me where her room was (just down a couple doors from mine) and asked that if I saw someone looking for her to tell them where she was. I assured her that I would.
- Marci often breaks into urgent pleas to “hurry up hurry, hurry!” This evening she wheeled herself laboriously down the hallway in her wheelchair, and in passing by made eye contact with me and said, “I’m just chasing after those two boys, trying to round them up!”
- Mildred is very quiet and walks incessantly down one hallway and up another pushing her walker which carries several books and a number of other belongings.
- Hank is often not happy here. He has a disgruntled manner, and often asks for help in finding his room. Yesterday I wheeled him to his room. He thanked me and said, “Now if I could just find my wife.” This evening, though, I heard an extended conversation that two assistants were having with him about his life—his parachuting during the Second World War, his marriage, his children. He was remarkably verbal in his responses to all their questions.
- Ann is a mild mannered woman who has a concern for the welfare of others. Yesterday she asked me if I could help Hank find his room. When I did, she came along behind and said, “Are you sure that is his room? Did he say it is his room?”
- Ruby often has a doll cradled in her arms as she moves around in her wheelchair. Today I was sitting nearby when she came up to where Ann was sitting and had a lengthy conversation with her about how she had not been able to get a new hat for her baby yet but that she was going to go shopping with her mother for this soon. She also talked about what a good baby this was. “She never cries. Some babies just cry so much. I expected her to really fuss early this morning but she was just nice and quiet.” Ann responded to all this with open friendliness and then they talked about clothes for a

while. Then Ruby said, “But I’m no spring chicken anymore. I’m one of those older generation chickens!” and they both laughed at the humor of that phrase.

- Margaret is a small Hispanic woman who shuffles slowly through the halls, and occasionally falls asleep positioned halfway in a chair with her feet on the floor. She speaks in wordless rhythms that are very responsive when she is spoken to by the staff.

Living here these four days has allowed me to see these and many other residents here in a new way. I am struck by how pleasant, accommodating and kind most of them are with each other. I am also aware that they seem to have very little to be meaningfully engaged in during the day. So much time is spent sitting in a wheelchair, or pacing the hallways. I wish there were a way they could be more involved in their own care, or in other meaningful activities.

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