

Does the Physical Environment Predict Depressive Symptoms in Older People Living in Care Homes?

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40 % of residents living in care homes in the United Kingdom have significant depressive symptoms, compared with 9% living in the community (Mann, Graham, & Ashby, 1984, McDougall et al 2007). Care homes can appear to be depressing places, but whether the physical environment of homes directly affects depression in care home residents is unknown.

An observational approach was used to explore the longitudinal association between the physical environment and depressive symptoms of older people living in care homes. The physical environments of 50 care homes were assessed using The Sheffield Care Environment Assessment Matrix (SCEAM). The instrument assessed over 300 discrete items of the physical environment of care homes representing ten domains: privacy, personalisation, choice and control, community, safety, comfort, support for physical frailty, support for cognitive frailty, awareness and normalness. Depressive symptoms were measured using the Geriatric Depression Score (GDS-15) for 510 residents living in the care homes at baseline, six months and one year.

Multi-level modelling was used to analyse the data. Participant level covariates included: age, gender, length of time in home, cognition (MMSE), dependency (Barthel Index), and social engagement (Index of Social Engagement). Home level covariates included: size, type (nursing/residential) and ownership.

Overall the features of the physical environment of care homes were not associated with depressive symptoms. Controlling for dependency, social engagement and home type, 'access to outdoor space' was the only environmental variable significantly associated with depressive symptoms. That the physical

environment inside care homes does not play a part in depressive symptoms is perhaps surprising but also to some extent reassuring. Many care homes have outdoor spaces but access is often compromised. Overcoming barriers, such as locked doors, lack of paths, inadequate seating, steep steps and needing permission or assistance of staff to go outdoors may contribute to the poor mental health of older people living in care homes.

References

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