



Reducing stigma and social isolation for LGBT+ people with dementia



What is the focus of the research?

Co-designing resources that help community visitors make and maintain social connections with LGBT+ people with dementia.



Why is it important?

LGBT+ people with dementia have diverse and complex support needs. After a lifetime of discrimination, many don't have families or community networks to rely on. People are often fearful or reluctant to engage with formal services and institutional care, due to multiple bad experiences. If they do engage with these services, they don't feel their gender or sexual identity is understood or affirmed.

This makes volunteer community visitors crucial to the health and wellbeing of LGBT+ people with dementia. The government-funded Community Visitors Scheme supports 11,000 volunteers Australia-wide to foster connections with socially isolated older people, including those in the LGBT+ community. But when symptoms of dementia surface, these visitors rarely have

the skills or knowledge of dementia to engage confidently, so they often stop visiting.

This pushes the most vulnerable LGBT+ people with dementia further into isolation. For many, these regular visits were their only form of social connection.

Using a participatory action research approach, Dr Smith has partnered with five community organisations to co-design training and engagement resources. These resources will support community visitors to create connections

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This project aims to support ongoing engagement with older LGBT+ community members, so they can continue to be affirmed in ways that are meaningful to them. ”

– Dr Louisa Smith

with LGBT+ people living with dementia by increasing their understanding of the rights, needs and experiences of people, their carers and families.

The results of this project have the potential to broadly inform health and social interventions, practices and policies, that seek to reduce stigma and improve the social inclusion of this priority population.



How will this happen?

Stage 1: hold focus groups with 50 community visitors of older LGBT+ people. Use body mapping, an arts-based research tool, to help people understand the challenges of making social connections with people living with dementia.

Stage 2: hold a workshop with a reference group to discuss those challenges and opportunities for connection discovered in the focus groups.

Stage 3: two participatory action research groups comprised of community visitors to take that information and develop content for the resources.

Stage 4: five collaborating organisations to trial the resources with 500 community visitors over six months.

Stage 5: resources to be adapted based on the feedback, then launched nationally.



What is participatory action research?

It's an approach to research, rather than a method of research, that actively involves people with lived experience of a problem as co-researchers. The goal is to generate new knowledge and develop ways to improve their circumstances.

It's particularly useful when addressing issues that involve people from disempowered and often-invisible groups. Participatory action research has four research phases – observe, reflect, plan and act – which are repeated to co-produce the most useful outcomes.



What will this mean for LGBT+ people with dementia?

- Creation of meaningful connections and genuine friendships.
- Reduced social isolation.
- Potential reduced rate of cognitive decline through regular social interactions.



Who's undertaking the research?

Dr Louisa Smith, Deakin University

Dr Smith is a senior lecturer in Deakin University's Disability and Inclusion team in the Faculty of Health. Her research explores the intersection between disability, dementia and complex support needs. Dr Smith has a particular interest in research that actively develops supports for those who are the most socially isolated. Her current research focuses on participatory action research approaches to co-develop and co-design resources that support people with disabilities and dementia and complex support needs.

The title of Dr Smith's project is *Rainbow Connections: Co-designing training and engagement resources to help community visitors to make and maintain social connections with LGBT+ people with dementia.*

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