

Relationships



Arcare's dedicated staff assignment fosters close relationships between staff, residents and families. From left: Cathy, dedicated carer to Bill, and Bill's daughter Wendy at Arcare Caulfield

Family matters

When staff and family relationships are positive, research shows that care outcomes for residents improve. **Jackie Keast** explores how some providers are engaging families, and what can be done when issues arise.

Back in 2012, Arcare conducted a series of focus groups with families to ask what was important to them in their loved ones' care.

The strongest theme to emerge? Families appreciated when close relationships formed between staff and residents.

"Not once was it about food, how well the bed is being made, or any of the other things that I thought it might be about," Daniella Greenwood, Arcare strategy and innovation manager, tells *Australian Ageing Agenda*.

Around the same time Greenwood was going through two years' worth of compliment forms – and again, everything was about relationships.

Through this and further interviews with staff and residents, Arcare realised that a staffing structure that saw staff rotated throughout facilities and often working infrequent shifts did not necessarily support these deeper relationships forming.

In response, the organisation adopted a staffing model it calls dedicated staff assignment. All staff commit to working at least three shifts a week, and always work with the same small group of residents – typically around five people.

Arcare emphasises to staff that building relationships with residents and families is their key role; everything else is secondary.

The model, for which Arcare won a Better Practice award last year, offers families a sense of security and comfort, says Greenwood.

Families get to know carers personally and know exactly who

will be with their loved one on what day, and at what time. This has forged stronger trust.

Evaluation of the program at 12 months saw a 45 per cent increase in family compliments, and a complete reduction in formal complaints, with issues that arose having been resolved with staff at the local level. Greenwood says that as families deal with less people, they are more likely to feel their voices are heard.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Michael Bauer, senior research fellow at La Trobe University's Australian Centre for Evidence Based Care, has done extensive research into staff-family relationships. He tells *AAA* that positive relationships typically result in better quality of care for residents.

However, his research has shown that some staff don't always see engaging with family as a part of their role.

"In some cases, staff are focused on the care tasks. The downside is when families appear they may be seen as interfering with the work that they need to be doing," he says.

Bauer says family can offer staff a wealth of knowledge about the resident, and are often an under-utilised resource. Management need to educate staff on the importance of family, and encourage them to build relationships to foster empathy, understanding and trust.

"Often staff are unaware of the journey that family has been on with the person who's now living in the facility; they may have been caring for them for a long time," he says.

Getting family involved can also help them deal with some