

VDT offers first-hand account of world of dementia patients



Consultant Hope Carwile, left, discusses the Virtual Dementia Tour with participant Sue Patha. (William J. Dagendesh)

By William J. Dagendesh | March 24, 2025

MONUMENT | A new education and training tool is giving people a glimpse into the world of dementia and the symptoms patients experience.

The Virtual Dementia Tour enables caregivers and health care providers to experience a simulated reality of what life is like for someone who suffers from dementia. Through the VDT, participants experience what it is like to have the condition, thereby developing awareness and compassion for dementia patients and caregivers.

Dementia results from a variety of diseases and injuries that affect the brain. Behavior includes anger, anxiety and aggressiveness, confusion, disorientation, suspicion, and language and communication difficulty. It is the seventh leading cause of death, and one of the major causes of disability and dependency among senior citizens.

Developed by geriatric specialist P.K. Beville, founder of Second Wind Dreams, the VDT is a scientifically proven method of building a better understanding of dementia.


SWD is an internationally known nonprofit dedicated to changing the perception of aging through the fulfillment of elders' dreams.

The VDT simulates the dementia-inflicted brain by using patented sensory tools and instruction to temporarily alter participants' physical and sensory abilities. This puts the participant in the shoes of the dementia patient. The VDT opened to the public in 2002.

"The VDT is a scientifically proven method that builds sensitivity and awareness in individuals caring for those with dementia by temporarily altering participants' physical and sensory abilities. This evidence-based program simulates changes associated with cognitive decline," said Recreational Quality Mentor Olivia Mogab.

During a March 18 tour at Jackson Creek Senior Living Center in Monument, participants experienced the sensory, cognitive and environmental challenges dementia patients experience. Consultant Hope Carwile outfitted six

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participants with eyewear that distorts vision, audio equipment that alters hearing and devices that alter sense of touch. Participants were asked not to photograph exercise materials.

Mogab escorted participants into a room where they experienced various sights, sounds and instruction designed to place them in the shoes of a dementia patient. Because dementia damages various parts of the brain, the VDT simulates symptoms and tricks the brain into responding and behaving like the brain of a dementia sufferer.

"The VDT is a simulation of dementia, not a specific type of dementia such as Alzheimer's or Lewy Body. It is meant to mimic 'mid-stage' symptoms," Mogab said.

Following the tour, participants shared their experience. One woman said she didn't experience anything. Another participant said it was difficult to hear instructions while others said they experienced confusion and found it difficult to perform simple tasks. Others reported experiencing flashes of light or feeling isolated from the environment.

Sue Patha, whose husband is in memory care, said she participated to gain a better understanding of dementia's symptoms.

"I wanted to learn what a person with dementia experiences," Patha said. "I recommend the tour to everyone. It's worth it to learn all you can."

Colorado Springs resident Dale Campbell echoed Patha's sentiment.

"This has been a mind-opening experience. This is a lot of information to digest," said Campbell whose wife was admitted to the facility in January.

Nicole DeJarnatt, senior account manager with the Boulder-based marketing agency Pivot Communication, participated in a 2024 tour.

"It provided invaluable insight into how I approach caring for my own mother living with memory loss," DeJarnatt said in an email.

Watching participants change how they behave and communicate with dementia patients is the most rewarding aspect of the tour, Mogab said.

"The VDT continues to improve as we gain more research and hone the tool," Mogab said. "The big stumbling block is getting enough people trained to use the program to reach everyone."

The World Health Organization reported that more than 55 million people worldwide have dementia and that this number is expected to increase to 139 million by 2050. More than 60% live in low-and middle-income countries and nearly 10 million new cases are added each year.

In 2019, dementia cost economies, globally, about \$1.3 trillion. About 50% of these costs are attributable to care provided by informal caregivers (family members and close friends)

who provide about five hours of daily care. According to Mogab, more than 3 million people in 20 countries have experienced the tour now implemented in more than 1,000 healthcare communities.

Despite dementia's commonality, many people are challenged to understand what it's like living with the condition. Through the VDT, participants have better insight into what dementia patients experience. The hope is that individuals who go through this tour never forget the feeling of what it might be like to live with a progressive dementia.

"Any lecture type of education may be forgotten, notes can be lost, PowerPoints discarded. But most individuals will never forget how living in someone else's shoes might physically and emotionally feel," Mogab said. "When participants feel it, change within happens."

Sales and Marketing Director Laura Hale said participants don't forget the VDT experience.

"The VDT can affect participants' attitudes and emotions, increasing insight and empathy," said Hale who has participated in the VDT. "Putting yourself in the shoes of someone who has dementia is an experience you won't forget."

Carwile concluded, "We don't have all the answers, but try to provide insight. The VDT helps us do that."

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Photo courtesy of William J. Dagendesh.