**Day in the Life of dementia champions**

The latest of our features highlighting the roles and responsibilities carried out by staff across ABMU sees us focus on the work of two of our dementia champions – **Meryl Williams** and **Lisa Thornhill**.

It is ABMU’s aim to become the first Dementia Friendly health board in Wales. So far almost 10,000 of our 16,000 staff have had dementia awareness training, helping us become the first board in Wales to win official recognition from the Alzheimer’s Society.

The 200 dementia champions - expected to be up to 250 by the end of the year - are there to offer enhanced effective and compassionate care to people living with the condition.

It is a role Meryl Williams (right) is passionate about. As clinical lead nurse in the chronic conditions management team in the North hub in Swansea, she is used to dealing with frail and elderly patients on a daily basis.

> "Every day could be very different. You do not know what is going to hit you when you pitch up for duty in the morning."

She said:

> “I may be doing anything from meeting with colleagues to discuss patients, visiting patients they have asked me to see and if they have an unusual case, especially regarding confusion or dementia, I can be asked to support them at an MDT meeting.

> “We deal with other things - heart failure clinics, people with lung disease and those who have had falls.”

Her job, along with her colleagues in the CCM services, also involves liaising with secondary care, social services and the ambulance service.

> “My clinical lead colleagues and I do a lot of service development and we also have to cover sickness.”
It was back in 2011 as her team noticed they were dealing with an increasing number of people living with dementia, they realised the importance of being trained to deal with it.

“Now all of my team have had training and a lot of our job is teaching and education – certainly for people living with dementia but also for other staff.”

Meryl, who also sits on the steering group of Dementia Supportive Community Swansea, said:

“The person living with dementia is the person that you are looking to support but they come with informal carers who are sometimes at their wit’s end, they are emotionally and physically fatigued and don’t know where to go.

“Some of them are desperate. To them it looks as if their relative has gone but, as we tell them, they haven’t gone, we just need to find them by a different way.

“That’s what my dementia champions will do, they will give a sense of calmness and support.”

She says knowledge is crucial to providing the right kind of support and is a fierce advocate for the This is Me booklet, devised by the Alzheimer’s Society, which can be filled in with practical details about the life of anyone living with dementia.

“If I do nothing else before I leave this job I want This is Me out in the public eye. If you know as much as you can about that person, their experiences, their likes and dislikes, their family, what’s important to them, you are more likely to get it right.

“If I know you don’t drink coffee, then I am never going to give it to you, I am never going to ask you if you want one and you are not going to be frustrated with me.

“After diagnosis we tend to wrap people living with dementia in cotton wool – ‘don’t make a cup of tea’, ‘no, you can’t dig the garden’ but actually there is nothing different from the day before when they didn’t have the diagnosis.”

As Meryl said:

“We want people to live at home for as long as possible. We don’t want these people to hit the hospital because it throws them completely.”
However, if they do have to be admitted they may come under the care of other champions such Lisa Thornhill, a physiotherapy assistant now based at Neath Port Talbot Hospital.

Her interest and enthusiasm in taking on the role comes from first-hand experience.

“My mum had dementia and now looking after elderly patients, that’s my love – and I am very proud to be a dementia champion.”

While working in Morriston Hospital Lisa (left) was instrumental is keeping the trauma and orthopaedics ward’s dementia boxes up to date. These contain details of any patients with dementia on the ward.

“I look in patient’s notes to see if they have a diagnosis of dementia and, if so, check butterfly stickers are in place for them.”

These stickers, placed alongside the patient’s name on the board at the nurses’ station, are a simple tool for reminding all staff that a patient may need extra support and assistance.

“We try to use them as a means not to offend but to help treat patients with dignity. They work wonders.”

Lisa’s responsibility also sees her making sure the Me to You booklet – which serves the same purpose as This is Me information while they are in hospital – is completed and explained to carers or family members.

“It is important to get to know a patient before asking them something. As a dementia champion I would assess the patient’s need for assistance and ensure it is built into their care plan.”

In her job assisting with the physical requirements of elderly and frail patients, Lisa knows the importance of keeping them active and uses music to help engage them during routine exercises.

Whether it is through a favourite song or asking a patient to share a memory, Lisa said:
“If you need to communicate with someone with dementia it is important to encourage the person to do so in whichever way works best for them.”

She says often simple actions by ward staff can have real benefits for patients.

“Try to help them when they find themselves in a strange environment. If a patient can’t make out water in their jug perhaps we can add some squash so they can see their drink.”

Lisa’s duties see her telling the sister how many dementia patients are on the ward and the end of her shift she checks again that the Me to You booklets are up to date ready for hand over.

She is convinced having a dementia champion on the ward has had huge benefits and is grateful she was allowed to take on the role.

“Without a shadow of a doubt this is making a real difference. As it’s been said, if we can improve care for one person then we can do it for 10, if we can do it for 10 we can do it for 100, if we can do it for 100 we can do it for 1,000 and if we can do it for 1,000 we can do it for everyone in Wales.”

If you think what you do in the health board isn’t widely known and you would like to take part in A Day in the Life .... or you would like to suggest a job role to be covered please contact communications.department@wales.nhs.uk.