Wandering in people with dementia

Wandering is a behaviour that can be found in some people with dementia, which is usually referring to moving around with a repetitive pattern[1]. There are various reasons for wandering, while this behavior could be affected by the biomedical cognitive impairment and the psychosocial condition of people with dementia, as well as their interaction with the environment [2].

According to a survey to local daycare services, providing care to people with dementia who wandered was perceived to be challenging[3]. When a person repeatedly escapes from a place, the behavior might result in the person getting injured or lost[2,4]. The risks are sometimes responded by restraining the freedom to move around. A survey about people with dementia living in Hong Kong reported that 30% of people with a lost history had been forbidden to go out alone since the episode[5]. Meanwhile, caregivers who found it hard to adjust to wandering and other behavioral symptoms showed a higher tendency to place their family members into nursing homes[6].

Although the risks of wandering might worry caregivers, intermittent pottering and mindless lapping would sometimes be considered harmless[4], and wandering might serve as physical exercise, helping people with dementia maintain their mobility[7,8]. In indoor settings such as nursing home, adjustment on the environment might prevent elopement while maintaining maximum freedom. Instead of applying direct physical restraints, which is considered ethically unacceptable[9], installing complicated locks, setting up door alarms, and camouflaging the entrances, might make unattended exit less feasible[10].

The missing-person records of a policing region in the UK showed that most lost incidents in people with dementia resulted in no bodily harm, but also pointed out that those without any sustained harm had a shorter length of missing[11]. For people with early stage dementia, wearable devices with a location-based service might provide a safe condition for them to live in the community. The devices might work as simply as to send the location information to the caregiver's mobile phone. A study on this device showed that, after using such a device for three months, people with dementia noted an increase in the freedom they experienced, and felt less worried when they were unaccompanied in the community[12]. Family members of people with early to moderate dementia who had used positioning system reported to find reassurance in the technology[12,13], and reported a reduction of time looking for the family members with dementia[14]. More advanced systems might even provide a step-to-step walking

guide to people with dementia, or alert the caregivers when a routine route is disturbed[15].

While new technologies may encourage caregivers to put less restriction onto the daily lives of people with dementia, support from the community is necessary to create a community that makes them more relaxed living there. In the US, community alert systems for missing people are effective in most states, as the assistance of community members is recognized to be highly useful, especially when a person is lost in his own neighborhood[16]. If helping hands are offered to apparently confused people on the public transport[11] and in community[17], people with dementia may live and sustain their usual activities in the community more at ease.

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