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Assessment and therapy for language and communication difficulties in dementia and other progressive diseases

There is growing recognition that language and communication problems occur in many degenerative conditions and as a consequence, speech and language therapists (SLTs) are receiving increasing numbers of referrals for clients with progressive diseases. This book is a valuable guide for therapists working with this diverse group of clients. Volkmer describes the communication difficulties experienced by people with different forms of dementia, discusses a variety of approaches to treatment and considers specific challenges associated with working with people with deteriorating language abilities. The book is written clearly and well-tailored to its target audience of SLTs. Key points are illustrated with detailed case study descriptions. These really bring the subject matter to life, demonstrating where a particular approach might be used with a patient in the clinic.

Throughout the book, there is an emphasis on evidence-based practice, though Volkmer is quick to acknowledge that in many areas, there is little evidence to go on at present. While there is a rich research literature on interventions for non-progressive patients, far fewer studies have investigated interventions targeted towards people with dementia. This situation is beginning to change now as these individuals are being referred to speech pathology services more regularly.

The book begins with some discussion of the scale of the dementia problems, stating that there are currently 570,000 people living with dementia in England alone - a daunting figure. The second chapter covers assessment and diagnosis. This can be a difficult area to get to grips with, partly because of the diverse forms of disorder but also because a variety of different terms can be used to describe overlapping (and sometimes identical) sets of patients. This potentially confusing situation is navigated clearly, with links made between the various degenerative conditions and forms of non-progressive aphasia.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to discussing treatment options. First, language impairment-based approaches are considered, including single word naming therapies and, at the sentence level, training with scripts. Here the focus is on the primary progressive aphasias, since it is these (particularly semantic dementia) that the majority of research has explored. Volkmer does not shy away from considering the limitations as well as benefits of each technique, and highlights the importance of matching therapy goals to patients' aspirations, and not only to their areas of impairment. For example, intensive naming therapies are unlikely to succeed if the patient is not motivated to complete regular homework assignments. Next, Volkmer discusses treatment for cognitive difficulties in communication, such as poor attention, monitoring and memory. This chapter is most relevant for clients with Alzheimer's or vascular dementia, for whom memory limitations may be the most significant barrier to successful communication. Finally, a chapter considers how therapists can support the conversation partners of people with dementia. There are plenty of practical suggestions, including for setting up group training sessions. Volkmer is also an advocate for the key role SLTs can play in helping nursing colleagues to communicate effectively with their patients.

The book also addresses other issues therapists might encounter when working with people with progressive disorders. One chapter covers assessment of mental capacity. This is discussed within the UK legal framework, though readers from other countries are likely to find it useful as well. The final chapter addresses the difficult issue of when and how to discharge a patient with a degenerative disorder. Volkmer advocates clear goal-setting from the start of therapy, so that patient and therapist agree on the scope of the intervention. She notes, however, that the door should remain open for re-referral should the patient's situation and communication difficulties change. She also reminds us that a patient's goals and expectations will need to change as their disease progresses.

Overall, this is a useful handbook for clinicians working with degenerative patients with communication problems and particular for its target audience of speech and language therapists.

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