

Alzheimer's treatment offers patients a 'room with a view'

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BALTIMORE — Every week Violet Bond walks into a kind of New Age artist's conception of heaven.

A low-glare light fills an 11 by 11½ foot chamber with milk-white walls and furniture. A curtain of fiber-optic tubes changes colors, a wind machine blows gently, a glass water tower bubbles. A projector casts a stream of animated pictures on a wall, and the sounds of chimes mingled with songbirds waft through the room.

"The colors are beautiful" says Mrs. Bond, an articulate 82-year old whose short-term memory is slowly being eroded by Alzheimer's disease. "Green used to always be my favorite color."

With no cure and little known about the cause of Alzheimer's, a Baltimore nursing home and adult day care center is using the soothing environment of the "Snoezelen" room as an experimental treatment for the fear and agitation that often comes with the disease.

Snoezelen (pronounced SNOOZE-lin) is a contraction of the Dutch words for "sniffing" and "dozing," picked to describe the combination of aromatherapy and low-stress atmosphere first used in Holland to treat mentally disturbed children. Officials at the Keswick home believe they are the first in the nation to use the room to treat sufferers of Alzheimer's, a degenerative disease that causes atrophy of the brain.

"We're looking at positive, pleasurable, here-and-now experiences that will enhance the

quality of life," says Mary Jo Evans, director of occupational therapy at Keswick. "We don't know what's going on when someone can't communicate with us, but that doesn't mean they don't need sensory stimulation."

Keswick residents spend 30 minutes a week in the room with a therapist or family members.

"Visits can sometimes be difficult," Mrs. Evans says. "The room provides not only the soothing effect but something of interest that they can share together."

Little research has been done on the device's effectiveness, but a 1993 British study found that patients suffered from dementia caused by Alzheimer's emerged happier and less fearful after a 30-minute session.

Although the British study used a "quality of life" standard established in 1991, a scale of happiness is elusive, says Constantine Lyketsos, assistant professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University.

"How do you measure the quality of life for somebody who can't tell you how they feel?" Lyketsos says.

Lyketsos thinks the Snoezelen is a great idea, but adds that the particular type of treatment may be less important than simply offering patients pleasant surroundings.

"I think that there are many ways to accomplish the same thing," he says.

Environmental therapies for dementia patients have been done for years, but research has tended to focus more on medication, says Linda Teri, a

professor with the University of Washington Medical Center's department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences in Seattle. But more researches, including Ms. Teri, are examining environmental treatments.

"Basically the concept is that the Alzheimer's patient, because of the brain disease, is not able to adapt to the environment as somebody with no impairment," she says. "You therefore adapt the environment to the patient."

Mrs. Bond's daughter, Corinne Dixon, says she sees a noticeable difference after her mother relaxes in the Snoezelen room.

Dementia sufferers often relive earlier stresses, making them determined to pick up a long grown child from school or rush to a job from which they retired decades ago.

Mrs. Bond sometimes talks of her six adult children as if they were still little and getting into mischief. "They know I'm watching and I'm not going to stand for it," she says.

In the Snoezelen room, Mrs. Evans gently prods Mrs. Bond toward less stressful conversation, focusing only on immediately observable objects. She hands Mrs. Bond canisters filled with scent-soaked cotton and asks her what she smells.

"These smells always remind me of baking," says Mrs. Evans, handing her a vanilla-scented container.

"I make pies, but not as often as I make cakes," says Mrs. Bond, neatly dressed with tortoise shell-rimmed glasses and styled white hair.