

Sensory stimulation no longer just for kids

Sessions with sound, light, aromatherapy a huge success with seniors

By JENNY MANZER

TORONTO — When Emma Bennett hears water splashing against rocks, it reminds her of Newfoundland, where she was born.

The sounds of home, the aroma of rosewood, bubbling tubes that change colour, the projected image of blue sky, and glowing strands of fibre-optic cables combine to create a multi-sensory experience called Snoezelen.

"It makes you feel peaceful," said Bennett, a Snoezelen user and patient at the Riverdale Hospital in Toronto, which offers long-term chronic care.

Snoezelen, a term marrying the Dutch words for "sniff" and "doze," was developed in Holland more than a decade ago as a way to provide relaxation and recreation for people with sensory and learning disabilities.

Snoezelen engages all five senses at once, and can be used to either provide sensory stimulation or destimulation and relaxation. The various components of Snoezelen also have been found to provide physical side benefits, such as increasing a patient's range of motion.

Snoezelen is best known for its use in children, although staff at Riverdale have found it can benefit a wide range of adult patients. Although many institutions around the world are outfitted with permanent Snoezelen rooms, the Riverdale Hospital uses the "à la carte" version, which brings the experience to the patient's bedside.

The cart and accessories, which the hospital bought in 1999 for about \$10,000, are in high demand.

"Everyday, there's somebody using it somewhere," said Valerie Alexander-Gertz, a recreation therapist and professional practice leader for therapeutic recreation. She said the stimulation is a boon for bed-bound patients who need a reprieve from the sterility of their rooms—patient such as those recovering from



Courtesy of Flaghouse



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While often used for children, an "à la carte" version of Snoezelen sensory stimulation therapy is now being used in Canadian hospitals for seniors. Riverdale Hospital patient Emma Bennett (right) says the sessions help remind her of Newfoundland, where she was born.

stroke or those in the palliative care unit.

Recreation therapy assistant Teresa Quaranto said she brings the cart to her patients with Huntington's chorea and acquired brain injuries. Snoezelen can prompt responses from people with Alzheimer's disease, or other patients who rarely show expression, said Quaranto. "They'll cry or laugh."

A Snoezelen session may calm patients who are agitated and prone to bouts of screaming. One Riverdale patient used to repeat "I want to go home," and clench the armrests of her chair. Once exposed to the Snoezelen, she would quiet down and loosen her grip.

"We watched her progress from agitated, to productive and purposeful activity," said Alexander-Gertz. "Her quality of life increased."

Jacqueline Sumsion, a recreation therapy assistant with Riverdale's cognitive support unit, has been charting the positive effects of Snoezelen over the past year. "It's been a huge suc-

cess," said Sumsion, whose patients include those with AIDS-related and geriatric dementia.

Therapists at Riverdale can tailor the Snoezelen experience to individual patients. Recorded sounds include a train rolling down the tracks, a waterfall with frogs chirping, and surf. There are more than 20 images available in the solar projector, including forests, beaches and clouds.

Aromatherapy can come in the form of stimulating citrus or peppermint, or a relaxing infusion of vanilla or lavender. The therapists may occasionally put a dab of essence on a patient's tongue to stimulate taste buds.

The kelp-like tangle of fibre-optic cables, which are attached to the Snoezelen cart, crunch to a patient's touch. There is also an array of other touchable accessories on hand, such as colourful "Kwosh" balls that vary from plush to spiky.

Although the cart has its advantages, the Riverdale therapists are pining for a permanent Snoezelen area. "We'd love a room," said Alexander-Gertz.



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Recreation therapists Valerie Alexander-Gertz and assistant Teresa Quaranto: Snoezelen unit is very popular.

The first Canadian Snoezelen room was installed at Toronto's Bloorview-Macmillan Centre nine years ago. Since then, more than 150 Snoezelen rooms have been introduced in hospitals, schools, nursing homes, and community centres across the country. Some rooms mimic elaborate jungles. Other have features such as wall-high bubble tubes, cascading fountains, sparkling carpets and

musical water beds.

Outfitting a room can cost as little as \$6,000 to more than \$40,000—the amount one Windsor, Ont., community centre paid to fill its 600-sq.-ft. room.

There are about 20 Snoezelen carts in circulation, said Marion Blum, a sales representative for Flaghouse, which distributes Snoezelen products in North America.