In the next 20 years, over one million Canadians are expected to have some form of dementia. Research shows that many of those people will also experience significant sleep disruption. This sleep disruption will interfere with all aspects of cognitive, social and physical function. Problem sleep is one of the most frequently cited reasons for institutionalization of older adults with dementia.

A large part of the problem is the prevalent belief that a poor sleep is a normal part of aging. As a result, people do not recognize that sleep problems are treatable and they do not seek help. Also, societal ageism, older adults’ denial of sleep problems, coexisting disabilities related to alcohol misuse, depression, isolation, and poor healthcare provider awareness all contribute to the under-diagnosis and under-treatment of disordered sleep in older persons and specifically, in those individuals with dementia.

Our team of researchers in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Alberta, recently completed a structured review of the evidence for non-pharmacological sleep interventions. We found that there is conclusive evidence for the non-pharmacological sleep interventions of bright-light therapy, increased daytime activity and passive body warming. We also found promising, but insufficient, evidence for a range of other sleep interventions.

Our research team, lead by Dr Cary Brown, developed a Knowledge Translation website (www.sleep-dementia-resources.ualberta.ca) to provide stakeholders with reliable, evidence-based information about the relationship between sleep and dementia, and to help them access resources for assessing and managing sleep problems in older adults with dementia. A full report of our review and downloadable patient education brochures on different non-pharmacological sleep interventions is also accessible on the website.

Our team’s next project is a survey of healthcare providers to gain insight into current practice and perceived barriers related to recommending non-pharmacological sleep interventions for persons with dementia. If you would like to be part of this study, or would like more information- please contact Dr. Cary Brown, Associate Professor, University of Alberta (cary.brown@ualberta.ca).

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