Four Seasons Health Care uses Nintendo Wii in Scottish care homes

Nintendo Wii brings residents 'out of their shells'
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writes Alisdair Suttie

(Pic by Martin Hunter)

Care home residents in Scotland are back playing the sports of their youth – courtesy of Nintendo Wii, reports Alisdair Suttie

One of the major challenges facing care homes is finding ways to stimulate residents and provide them with an interest to occupy their time. A trial in 10 Scottish care homes has come up with an unlikely solution in the shape of the Nintendo Wii games console.

The homes in the Four Seasons Health Care group were the first to receive the consoles in October 2008, since when the project has been rolled out to a further 10 homes in Scotland.

The games console also helps the care homes achieve their legal obligation to provide a form of physical exercise for residents. Senga Abraham, the group's care services manager for Scotland, says: “There's been a noticeable improvement in the outlook of many residents. Whether a resident can stand or sit when using the Wii, it gives them a gentle workout and we've found they are brighter and more alert after using the games console. There's a range of games available, so it offers something for almost everyone.”

Gowrie House

A visit to the Gowrie House care home in Kirkcaldy, Fife, found the residents queuing to have their chance with the Nintendo Wii. “The change has been quite amazing,” says care home manager Anne Smith. “Residents who were once happy to spend much of their time in their rooms are now out in the lounge area where the console is. It's got residents mixing more with each other and interacting. Some of them get quite impatient for their turn.

“The console has helped a great deal with some residents who, I think, missed their former ability to take part in sports. With the Wii, they can recapture some of that ability and it's brought back some of their competitive spirit.”

Cognitive impairment

Another area where the Nintendo Wii has helped is in slowing the rate of cognitive impairment. Four Seasons has not carried out its own study, but many staff in the 10 care homes report improved awareness among residents. The Alzheimer's Society would like to see research carried out into whether computer-based stimulation can slow the progress of dementia or reduce the risk.

Cheryl Brown, Gowrie House's personal activities leader, backs this up...
with her own experience. "We've seen
many of the residents really come out
of their shells since the Wii arrived. It
helps that the Wii is much more visual
and the other residents can watch what
the player is up to. Instead of getting a
board game out of the cupboard and
trying to interest a few residents, the
Wii has captured their imaginations."

Easy to use

Another key to the success of the Wii is its ease of use, says Brown. "Unlike
some games consoles where everything is worked through small and fiddly
buttons, the Wii uses different attachments, such as a racket for tennis or a club
for golf. It makes it easy for the residents to understand how to play, especially
as many of them were active in sports when they were younger."

One such resident is 94-year-old Maria Dorward, who was a keen tennis player
in her youth and is now just as devoted to the game on the Nintendo Wii. "We
may not be able to get to the tennis court, bowls club or golf course, but we're
still young at heart," she says. "This is a way to keep up with the sports we
enjoyed in our youth."

Community links

A further unexpected benefit of the Wii consoles coming into the Scottish homes
has been the creation of a link between the residents and the young people in
the local communities. "We've had children from the local school come into the
home to visit," Smith says. "They are so familiar with the Wii that it's easy for
them to show the residents how to use it and get the best from it. The Nintendo
has helped bridge the gap between the generations.

"One boy who came was amazed. At first he thought it was going to be really
boring and that care homes were scary places. After he came with the local
school and used the Wii, he said it was just like visiting his granny and couldn't
wait for his next visit. That's been a real eye-opener and is vital for bringing the
community together."

With so many benefits to the introduction of the Nintendo Wii consoles to the 20
homes in Scotland, Four Seasons Health Care is looking to expand this initiative
elsewhere. From the evidence of the experiment in Scotland, the only challenge
it will face is finding enough time for all the residents to play.

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