Palliative Care and Dementia
The philosophy of the person-centred model of care advocates for people with dementia and resonates with the broad principles of palliative care (Hughes 2005, Fahey McCarthy, McCarron 2008). These include a focus on quality of life with good symptom control; a holistic approach taking account of the person’s life experience and current situation; care of both the person with dementia and those who matter to them and emphasis on open and sensitive communication with patients, carers and professional colleagues.

While it is acknowledged internationally and within Ireland that palliative care has a role in the care of people with dementia, there are very few evidence-based service models which demonstrate how this can be achieved.

Introducing palliative care in the dementia pathway is particularly challenging due to the duration of the disease, the progressive inability of the individual to communicate and participate in decision-making about their care and the sensitivity surrounding the subject.

The Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF)/HSE Report of 2008 “Palliative Care for All: Integrating Palliative Care into Disease Management Frameworks” which looked (inter alia) at the palliative care needs of people with dementia recommended that a palliative care approach should be introduced early in the disease trajectory, and found that more clarity is required on the role of all levels of palliative care for people with dementia.

In response to this key recommendation, a two-year action research project started in November 2009 to devise, implement and evaluate appropriate palliative care responses for people with dementia within an Irish health care context. The project is jointly funded by the IHF and the Alzheimer Society of Ireland.

The action research project is based at St. Joseph’s Residential Facility, Ennis, under the auspices of Clare Mental Health Services for Older People. A part-time research project officer has been appointed. She will be supported directly by the Consultant Psychiatrist and the Assistant Director of Nursing. The facility’s key research partners are the local primary care network and the specialist palliative care (SPC) services from Milford Hospice, Limerick.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are:
- Clarity on nature, potential and timing of palliative interventions for people with dementia, their families and staff.
- A model of support and intervention for implementation in other services.
- Education material for key personnel in delivering palliative responses.
- Guidelines for the introduction of palliative interventions and referral to SPC
- Information materials for service users, family members and staff outlining symptoms, treatment options and advance planning for people with dementia.

Further information: Marissa Butler, St. Joseph’s: Tel: 087 2251218 Email: marissa.butler@hse.ie  www.hospice-foundation.ie