



Innovation,
Applicability and
Transferability

Australian iSupport for Dementia Research Update

Background

iSupport is an evidence-based online dementia education and skills training program for family carers. Originally developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), it has been adapted and is currently being tested for the Australian market. It includes five learning modules and 23 learning units. The content targets the learning needs of carers at the beginning of their carer journey.

Resthaven is a project partner in the three-phase project, working with carers of people living with dementia to test the effectiveness of the program in Australia.

Following the initial pilot project in 2019, the project is now funded by a Medical Research Future Fund 2020 Dementia Ageing and Aged Care Mission grant and a 2020 Dementia Centre for Research Collaboration (DCRC) World Class Research Projects grant.

Phase one, to co-design activities, was delivered in 2022 by iSupport Program facilitators.

Second Phase Outcomes

In the first half of 2024, phase two determined the intervention effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and carers' experiences in the program. Participants completed a set of online education modules targeting their learning needs throughout their caring journey.

Phase 2 results indicate a significant improvement in how participants managed changed behaviours, and registered an improvement in overall Quality of Life.

Key learning (Phase 2)

Carers reported that most value was derived from the support and learnings they received from each other's real-life experiences, during the facilitated online support meetings.

To add to this, they also identified that online only communication limits development of rapport between carers in the Resthaven participant demographic.

Despite meeting online throughout the year, when some participants chose to meet together in person for a celebratory Christmas lunch, the majority considered the lunch to be the **first** time they had officially '**met**'. Most indicated that they would have liked such a face to face activity to have taken place at the commencement of the support group.

The key learnings are to have a focus on the facilitated online support groups and to incorporate face-to-face engagement at the start of the program so that participants meet each other in person. This would make them feel more comfortable participating in online meetings more quickly, encouraging them to open up in online conversations.

Case study:

Bernie's wife was diagnosed in 2014 with dementia at the age of 74

After a few years stumbling along using online services to educate himself and navigate this 'terrible journey', Bernie became a participant in the iSupport program.

'This has been a game changer for me because it connected me to a group of people facing the same issues. Some were coping with their loved one at a more advanced stage compared to our situation.

'Having the face to face connection was rather daunting at first but the Resthaven folk were extremely helpful.

'The overall program is very helpful, and I get the most benefit from garnering information from fellow group members.'

- *Bernie*



Phase Three

The third and final phase of the project commenced in the second half of 2024.

Carers of existing Resthaven clients living with dementia were given the opportunity to participate by attending virtual support meetings.

Meetings commenced in September 2024 and will continue for six months. They will mirror the current model, focusing on the support group meetings. An important change will be the introduction of a preliminary in-person 'meet and greet' function, to be held at a central Adelaide location to kick off the support group.

The testing of this small change to the model will assist the assessment of the cost/benefit of virtual meetings versus the identified client preference for the more traditional in-person support model.

Evaluation will provide valuable feedback on whether a virtual model is sustainable in the longer term.

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