

Art Therapy for Elderly People with Dementia: A Pilot Study

Benise Mak¹, Jean Woo^{1,2}, Wendy Kou¹, Rosa Tse¹

¹CADENZA: A Jockey Club Initiative for Seniors, Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Hong Kong

²Department of Medicine and Therapeutics, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction

As the number of persons with dementia is also increasing with an increase in elderly population, dementia is sometimes referred to as “the disease of the century” (Thomas, 1993). Ways to assist with supportive treatment and behavioral and psychological interventions for this health concern and to improve the quality of life of elderly people with dementia are greatly needed (e.g., Chiu & Chiu, 2005; Kahn-Denis, 1997; Lawton, 1994; Rusted et al., 2006).

Much has been said and written about the effectiveness of art therapy in improving demented people’s psychological health (e.g., Kahn-Denis, 1997; Pini, 1996). It is a non-pharmacological, non-medical intervention that can have a direct impact on the well-being of the patients (Johnson & Sullivan-Marx, 2006). This claim however mainly based on some single case observation (e.g., Johnson & Sullivan-Marx, 2006; Johnson et al., 1992; Kahn-Denis, 1997; Kamar, 1997; Rentz, 2002; Rusted et al., 2006; Steward, 2004; Wood, 2002). Little empirical work has been done to determine its effectiveness.

The Present Study

This pilot study was an attempt to systematically evaluate the usefulness of art therapy in dementias and to determine if art therapy could help alleviate their behavioral and psychological symptoms.

Methodology

Outcome Measures. To measure behavioral and psychological symptoms, the Chinese version of Cohen-Mansfield Agitation Inventory (CCMAI) and the Chinese version of Neuropsychiatric Inventory (CNPI) were used. These scales are commonly used to measure demented people’s levels of agitated behavior and psychological problems. To estimate the effectiveness of the art therapy, participants were assessed by using CCMAI and CNPI before and after the treatment. To determine its sustained effects, the participants were assessed again in one, three and six month follow-up.

Design. A repeated measures design was adopted.

Participants. Twelve demented elderly aged over 65 were recruited from an old aged home. Two group sessions with a number of 6 patients were conducted as small group format can help to decrease social isolation and offer connection and support (Johnson & Sullivan-Marx, 2006).

Intervention. Participants received a session of one-hour art therapy once a week for 20 weeks. An art therapist was hired to run the sessions.

Results

To compare the changes of CCMAI and CNPI scores before and after the treatment and to examine its sustained effects at one, three and six month follow-up, repeated measures ANOVA were conducted.

Results show that after the 20 sessions of art therapy, participants’ levels of CCMAI and CNPI (i.e., their levels of agitated behaviour and psychological problems) were reduced significantly and these effects appeared to sustain up till 3 months after the treatment stopped (Figure 1). This has clearly been shown in some of the subscales of CNPI (Figure 2). Compared to the baseline measurement, participants’ levels of agitation, depression, irritability and anxiety were reduced significantly after the art therapy programme and continued to go down at one and three month follow-up, but these improvements (except in their level of anxiety) were not maintained at six-month follow up.

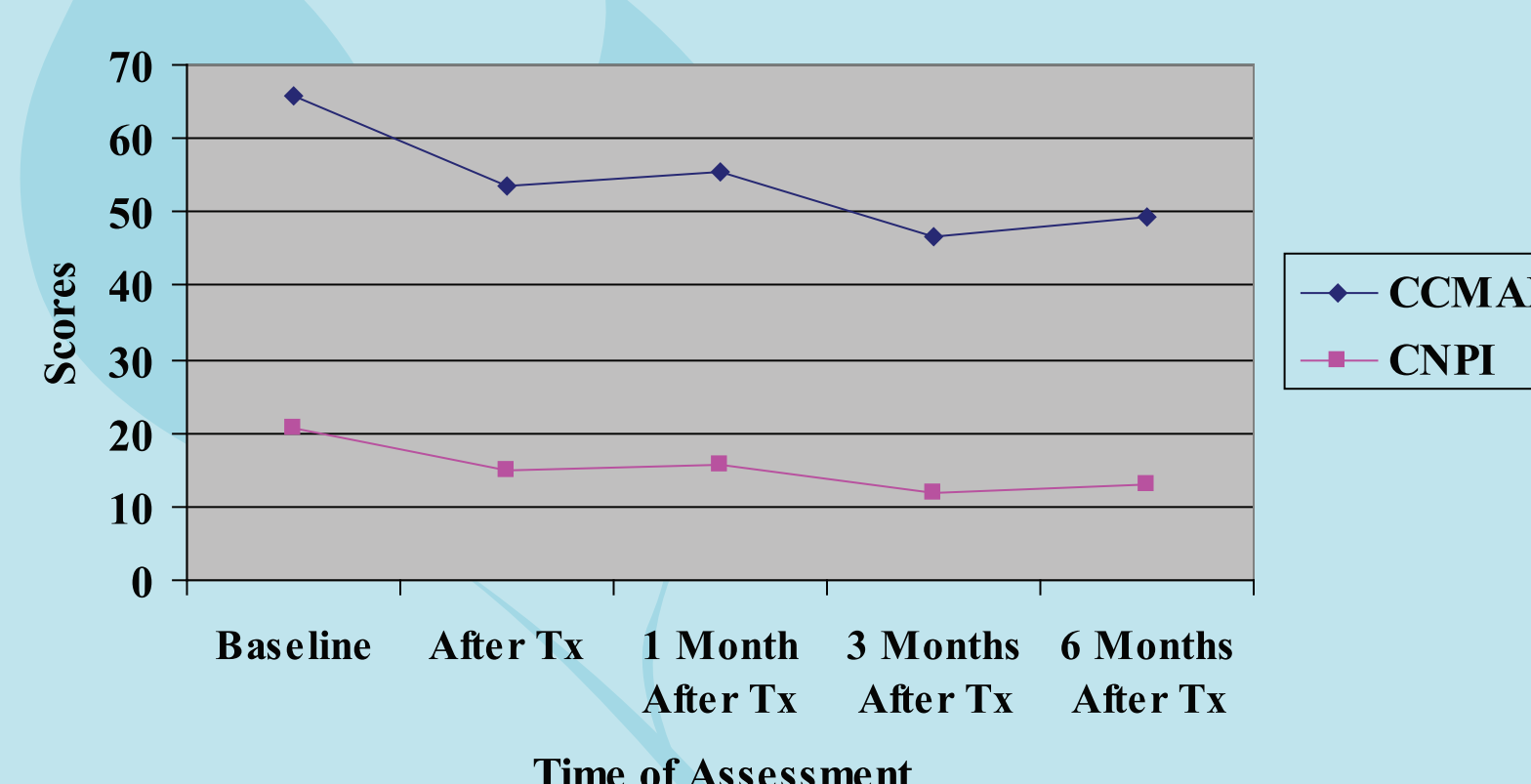


Figure 1: Participants’ levels of CCMAI and CNPI scores before and after the treatment, with three follow-up assessments at one, three and six months

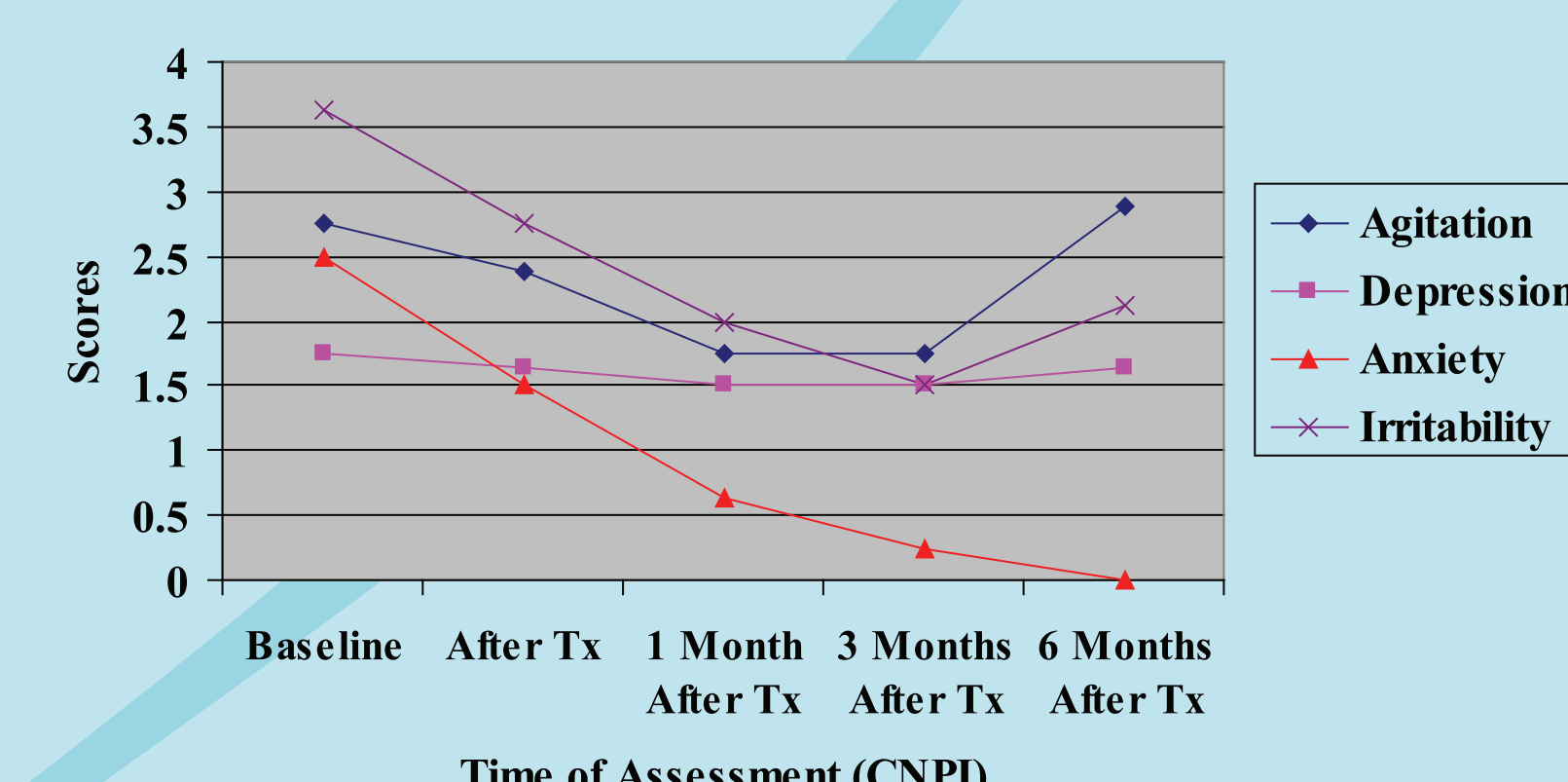


Figure 2: Participants’ levels of agitation, depression, anxiety and irritability (subscales of CNPI) before and after the treatment, with three follow-up assessments at one, three and six months

Discussion

These preliminary findings, albeit with such a small sample size, seem to provide support for the hypothesis. This pilot study helps to form a basis for future research and study.

Direction for Future Study

A randomized controlled trial will be adopted and a larger sample size (140 patients) will be recruited in our main study.

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