

# A Gesture Speaks A Thousand Words

## Background

The notion of the **expert patient** approach is gathering momentum in the management of chronic conditions but is rarely applied to the disability of dementia. The **voice of the person with dementia** must not be lost and we have much to learn from them when we see them as expert in handling their own disability. Observation of body language, notably gesture, could lead to a **practical way of supporting idiosyncratic communication** with the person with dementia. Non verbal communication is often analysed in dementia care in an attempt to manage challenging behaviour, but little attention has been paid to the significance of idiosyncratic gesture when the person with dementia is operating in a state of well-being.

## Aim

Our aim was to use life history work in combination with an individualised tool called SPECAL Observational Tracking (SPOT) to **identify gestures which people with dementia used to punctuate, accentuate and supplement their verbal communication**. We aimed to use these tools to develop a personalised lexicon of the person's key gestures relating to positive themes from their past life which could provide a **mutually understandable language between care givers and the person with dementia**, with the capacity to keep pace with changing verbal and cognitive abilities as dementia progressed. We hoped that this would **enable therapeutic lines of communication to remain open between the person with dementia and those supporting them right to the very end of life**.



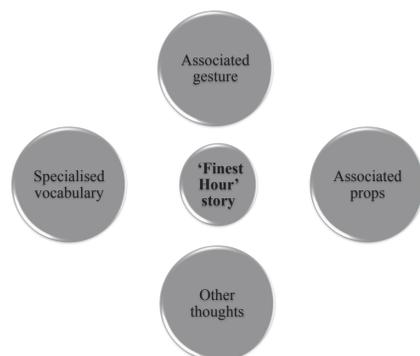
**gesture** /'dʒestʃəl/ (noun) a movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning.

**OVERALL OBJECTIVE: To enable care managers to identify and then use personal gesture to enhance communication with a person with dementia**

Care managers and professional care workers in a live-in care setting were trained in communication techniques based on the SPECAL method and designed to maximise rehearsal by the person with dementia of positive experiences from their past. Carers then recorded gestures which conveyed contextual relevance. These gestures were then used by both parties to accentuate meaning and establish rapport in a remarkably simple way. In time the use of gesture overtook the associated verbal narrative and enabled clear two-way transfer of information – less becoming more.

## The Concept

People with dementia randomly fail to store new factual information and will very sensibly match older factual memories with the here and now to make sense of the present. Identifying themes from the past which give the person with dementia a sense of well-being and safety is important. 'Finest Hour' stories hold special significance for the person and their re-telling promotes well-being. Bridging the gap between the present and the past through the use of idiosyncratic gesture can help create a feeling of safety and contentment in the here and now. Importantly, gesture can be used to convey this sense of contentment and context whilst undertaking Activities of Daily Living on a sustainable 24 hour basis.



## Theory

Dementia, for the purposes of management, is best understood as the random, intermittent but increasingly frequent inability to store new facts, whilst continuing to store new feelings in the normal way. Gesture is used unconsciously by every human being to emphasise their narrative, and people with dementia are no different in this respect. It is important to **avoid data overload when communicating with people with dementia, and to promote good feelings whenever possible**. A carefully chosen gesture can **often speak a thousand words**, conveying a complex message with simplicity. Where carers learn to use the idiosyncratic gesture of the person with dementia to convey coherent messages, they are able to sustain communication channels and keep pace with the person's disability.



## Case Studies and Examples



Frank served in the Royal Navy. He understood a military salute as conveying a sense of respect, comradeship and belonging. Starting an encounter with this important gesture expresses a message: that of being in the same team. Authenticity and attention to detail is crucial: the Royal Navy salute with their palm facing down, the Army and RAF salute with palm facing outwards – another message altogether.

Jim is a jovial gentleman – observation showed how often he used a 'cheers' gesture, raising an imaginary glass, to indicate friendly greeting, agreement or celebration of success. For Jim this gesture means 'all is well'. As his dementia progressed, this gesture was used increasingly by carers to convey a sense of safety, contentment and friendship throughout many aspects of his care over each 24 hour period.



Mary is a deeply Christian lady. She is living with advancing dementia and struggles with day-to-night transitions, meaning she is finding it hard to feel settled at night. Careful observation of her body language, matched to life history including personal routines and rituals, revealed that saying prayers before bed was important to Mary. Hands clasped in prayer and then gently parting became a symbol for Mary that 'all is well' - we have done everything we should have done and now we can safely rest. A slow re-clasping of the hands as they moved up to the cheek provided a comforting 'Good Night!' to Mary and heralded a peaceful journey into sleep.

Tony was a cricketer and had an amazing Finest Hour story about a particularly successful cricket match in his youth. As the detail in his story became less over time, so the gestures assumed greater importance and the key gesture lived on. Tony's concept of 'cricket' and all that it stood for in his life became encapsulated in a simple prop and gesture: the holding of a cricket ball, weighing it in the hand and rubbing it on his trouser leg. Carers gradually wove this simple gesture into the Activities of Daily Living for Tony, using an apple or orange from a conveniently placed fruit bowl: this was all that was needed to transport Tony back to his Finest Hour days. He remained in touch with his cricketing self and continued to function remarkably well in the here and now until the very end of his life.



## Results

Case study results were positive. The inputs were an initial trawl through life history, increased carer communication skills to enable a subtle triggering of Finest Hour stories, and close observation of accompanying gesture. The carer's subsequent use of selected gesture whilst engaged with Activities of Daily Living with the person with dementia was beneficial to all concerned. Provided that carers were well versed in SPECAL Observational Tracking (SPOT) techniques, they were able to use fewer words and over time the gestures became self-supporting; this empowered the person with dementia to talk more freely and to sustain meaningful communication with those around them to the end of life.

## Conclusion

Careful observation of a person with dementia enables us to see how they use gesture in the normal way to accentuate their own communication. Use of these closely observed gestures during interactions with the person with dementia helps carers to transcend any limitations imposed by cognitive ability to process complex verbal language.

## In Summary

- People with dementia are expert in their use of old memories in a way which compensates for their disability. They have significant information to offer the carer which should be listened to, observed and used to promote coherence and therapeutic interaction on a sustainable basis.
- The skill of eliciting 'Finest Hour' stories combined with close observation of gesture can support a long term communication strategy even where verbal skills may diminish.
- A social care workforce must have the understanding, values and competency required to develop and deliver an individualised and sustainable communication strategy.