

## Blokes and Sheds: Meaningful Activities for Men with Dementia in

### Aged Care Facilities (and the Community)



In Australia, it is common for a bloke's domain to be the shed, a virtual workshop full of equipment, tools and hoarded goods, collected over countless years. As the years pass, time spent in the shed increases proportionally with a bloke's age. The outcome of this process is that when a bloke retires from his day job, a natural, smooth transition is made into the shed, where he continues to work and pursue his pastimes and dreams. The natural rhythm of life is not broken for either himself or his wife, as each morning he continues to have a purpose to his life, and leaves the home and his wife for work in the shed.



In a home setting, the shed is a place of sanity for both parties. Thank goodness for sheds. A place where clutter, dust, strange smells, disorder and an accumulation of odds and ends are the norm. This flies in the face of the home, where she who must be obeyed keeps everything in its place, ordered, neat and tidy.

Some blokes just like pottering around and enjoying the solitude, sitting in a comfortable chair, listening to their favourite radio station while sorting a few items and at the same time knocking back a cold one from the old fridge now and again.

However, due to ill health or dementia, some blokes have no choice but to live in an aged care facility, not just with one woman, but with 20 to 60 or more!

In addition to this, the staff team are mostly women, who cater for his physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs.

It is little wonder that men have a dis-proportionately high instance of behaviours of concern within aged care facilities compared to women. They need to get out to a shed where appropriate activities are provided in a familiar environment and the domain is mainly for men.

When relocating a person to an aged care facility, the environment should be as similar as possible to the one they have come from. For many women, this is fine, as there are lovely sitting rooms and dining areas for activities which cater to women's needs. These may be as diverse as using a scone cutter or washing some dishes, to participation in social groups.

It must be understood, however, that these activities are alien to most men, and they have ongoing unmet needs which may be easily catered for by providing a shed-like environment and related activities.

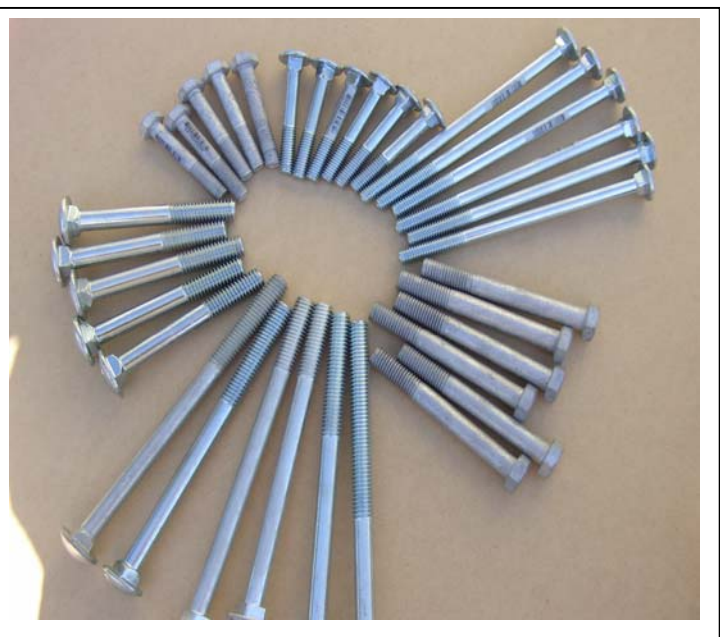
Men need their space, and opportunities to pass the time with other men. Apart from sitting in the shed, they may be keen to take part in some work-like activities, be it sorting, simple assembly, sanding or project work, as and when they feel like it, in between yarns.

It is well documented that engaging in meaningful activities and hobbies can have a positive outcome for a person with dementia.

Rather than giving up activities, it may be possible to modify them, thus maintaining the person's dignity. Pastimes based on the men's past history provide mental stimulation which is crucial to keeping functioning parts of the brain active.

When considering activities it is imperative to tap into each person's life history to enable the provision of tailored activities. It is equally important to conduct a risk assessment on each man to ensure, as far as possible, they are maintained in a safe environment.

By creating a shed in an aged care facility, meaningful activities can be easily set up and may be as basic as sorting screws, nails, or assembling nuts and bolts or irrigation components, etc. Consideration needs to be given to the potential for some to place things in their mouths.



cheese boxes, fruit and vegetable crates and household drawers. Collections of old hand tools and implements men may have used in bygone years may bring meaning and warm memories flooding back to them, e.g. old planes, hammers, brace and bit drills, tape measures (in feet and inches thank you), handsaws, miter boxes, etc. Allow them to look at these, handle them and use them. Discussions may ensue around these tools, together with some practical demonstrations on how they were used.



To assist the men to be successful in former skills, it may be necessary to break the skills down into achievable steps (task analysis); to simplify the task or to use jigs to make the task more manageable. Some steps may need to be carried out by staff or relatives, allowing for the man to complete other steps independently or semi-independently.

Tools could be placed onto a shadow board, in the correct position to the corresponding silhouette of it. Dependent on individual retained skills, this may vary from placing only a few tools to all tools in position. This would be like completing a giant jigsaw puzzle but with meaning for men. Placing sockets, screwdrivers and drill bits into corresponding templates in their toolbox provide other jigsaw puzzle type activities.



Daily routine activities may include checking the rain gauge and thermometer located near the shed. A rainwater tank could be installed to collect the run-off from a shed.

The site handyman may prove to be a natural Diversional Therapist and would have an even more fulfilling role in an aged care facility as he yarns, engages and involves the men in the shed with some of his work. (Of course he will have his tools and power equipment set up in an adjoining locked workshop.)

Other bridges could be built to men in the community, who volunteer their time to assist in the shed. These volunteers may also fulfil a need of their own to get out of the house and be of practical assistance to other men.

A focus for visitors

Family and friends sometimes have difficulty when visiting their loved ones and friends. The reasons for this are various, including the feeling that they are intruding, feelings of guilt, that the environment seems foreign, and being unsure what to talk about, especially if the person has dementia. Consider how natural it would be when visiting dad to spend the time in the shed. Here you are on common ground and don't feel as threatened.

The familiar aromas of oils, timber, and sawdust will bring comfort, and, in themselves, bring back memories to some men. It is easy to set up with rags soaked in different fluids and a bag of timber shavings.

But we don't have room for a shed!

Fair enough, but maybe there is a room which can be converted to support and assist such activities? How about discussing this dilemma and concern for the men with a local service group to see what they can come up with?





A shed has the potential to draw in male volunteers who would have previously been reluctant to enter the strange, unfamiliar environment of the Aged Care Facility, dominated mainly by women.

So much of his story (history) goes when a man is forced to abandon his shed with its decades worth of stored tools, miscellaneous items, memories and smells, let alone his seclusion. So don't dilly-dally, get a shed, and if you already have one, let the families know that their men can bring some of their beloved treasures with them to add to the shed collection.



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