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Moments of joy and delight: The meaning of traditional food in intercultural dementia care

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Traditional food strengthens the feel of belonging, identity and heritage, which helps institutionalised ethnic minority patients with dementia to hold on to and reinforce their cultural identity and quality of life. Taste is more cultural than physiological. Dietary habits are established from the early stages of life and may be difficult to change. Being served unfamiliar dishes may lead to disappointment and a feeling of being betrayed and unloved. A qualitative design was used where in-depth interviews were conducted with family members and nurses in dementia care in South Africa and among ethnic Norwegians and the Sami in Norway. The study showed that traditional foods created a feel of belonging and joy. Familiar tastes and smells awakened pleasant memories in patients and boosted their sense of wellbeing, identity and belonging, and even produced words in those who usually did not speak. The cultural significance of food to feel contentment and social as well as physical wellbeing is discussed. Besides helping the patients to avoid under nutrition, being served traditional dishes may be very important to reminiscence, joy, thriving, and quality of life.

Conclusion: In persons with dementia, dishes from their childhood may help maintain and strengthen their cultural identity, create joy and increase patients' feeling of belonging, being respected and cared for. Traditional food furthermore improves patients' appetite, nutritional intake and quality of life. To serve traditional meals in nursing homes there is a need of extra planning and resources, traditional knowledge, creativity and knowledge of patients' personal tastes.

Biography

Ingrid Hanssen, Master of Nursing Science, completed her Doctor of Political Science in 2002 from the University of Oslo, Norway. She worked as a nurse in Norway and in the UAE. She has headed research nationally and internationally (South Africa, Montenegro, and Serbia). She is a Professor of Intercultural Nursing at Lovisenberg Diaconal University College, Oslo. She has published several books, book chapters and 19 papers in reputed journals.

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