A Nice art project

By Valerie Lafont and Cathy Greenblat. Photographs by Cathy Greenblat, France

The management of diseases of memory cannot be limited to research on pharmacological treatments and methods for early diagnosis. The fight against the disease should also entail adaptation of the environment, and promotion of the sense of dignity and a positive vision of ageing. It is essential, then, to engage in multidisciplinary activities that address both people with dementia and their families. Such activities should focus on improvement of their quality of life, integration of people with dementia into the society, and creating a destigmatised image of them.

These aims are part of the France Alzheimer plan (2008–2012), which promotes non-pharmaceutical treatments, care for both people with dementia and their carers, and initiatives that help to change the perceptions of the general public about Alzheimer’s and related disorders and about ageing.

In a growing number of cities in the world, cultural sites have opened their doors to those with cognitive challenging disorders. Programmes at the Louvre in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, feature structured art experiences for small groups of such persons. Under a policy of openness to cultural sites for people with various disabilities, the city of Nice and the Center for Memory Research and Resources (the CMRR) of the hospital network of Nice established a collaborative project.

In the spring of 2010, seven municipal, state and national museums participated in the pilot programme, each hosting a one and a half hour group visit by an average of 12 people with dementia and family members from the CMRR and several day programmes. Structured presentations, encouraging participant interaction, were presented by museum personnel working with teams of professionals from the CMRR. This social, cultural and artistic project was nested in the larger clinical experience provided by and evaluated by the CMRR staff. Cathy Greenblat, Artist in Residence at the CMRR, documented the programme photographically.

As a result of the enthusiastic responses by all concerned, the municipality agreed to continue and expand the programme in 2011. The mayor and city council invited and arranged a one-month exhibition of 24 of Cathy’s photographs in the entrance hall of main library of the city, where an announcement was made on World Alzheimer’s Day 2010 of the larger programme to come. The first partners were the museums of Nice; in the enlarged artistic programme the museums will continue to be of importance, but other associations such as the Music Conservatory, the Opera, the Theatre National de Nice, and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Nice will participate as well.

The originality of the programme is, in its success, helping a municipality bring to bear the resources necessary to improve the integration of these people with dementia into their immediate environment: their city.

We believe that similar collaborative programmes between groups serving the Alzheimer’s community and municipal governments’ cultural offices can be established in many other places.

An exhibition of Cathy Greenblat’s photographs will be held at Baycrest Hospital, Toronto, 27 March to 25 May with scheduled tours on 27 and 29 March. For more information see details at the ADI conference or email info@alz.co.uk