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Centric Consulting Pilot Project Using Virtual Reality to Benefit Hospice, Assisted Living Patients

BY VANESSA ORR

Dealing with an end-of-life illness is never easy, either for the person receiving palliative care or for his or her family members. But a new virtual reality project, led by Centric Consulting, is helping ease patients' anxiety through distractive technology—and it might even be able to reduce the need for opioids or other pain medications.

The pilot project, which has been underway at Vista Springs Quail Highlands assisted living facility in Ohio for the past few months, uses VR headsets to provide residents with an escape from their everyday lives—whether that's through a virtual tour of Italy, a scuba-diving experience, or just time spent in a calm, meditative place.

"One of the biggest benefits of this technology is that it allows our community members to find their happy place," said Lisa Izzo, Vista Springs Quail Hollow life engagement director. "It provides a distraction and relieves anxiety without the use of pain medications.

"As one of our community members told me, it takes them to a different world," she added. "It gives them a different kind of joy."

Residents who want to take part in the program don a virtual reality headset, and choose from different experiences that they would like to see. Using a tablet, a healthcare assistant follows their journey, monitoring their progress. What makes the Centric pilot unique is that in addition to the VR equipment, an app has been created that allows care providers to monitor the person's physical and mental condition both before and after the experience. In addition to monitoring vital signs, participants are also asked to respond to a short survey.

"We're really big on the whole-life experience for our community members, and in a way, this has helped to bring life back," said Izzo of the reaction of those involved in the pilot. "It's giving them a chance to experience things that they have been missing because of the aging process."

Refining the Patient Experience

According to Centric Consulting National Healthcare Practice Lead Dr. Marcie Stoshak-Chavez, the idea for the project was sparked by an article she saw written by one of her former healthcare residents who was involved in hospice and palliative care in California. Centric began working with the San Diego-based hospice for initial testing before launching the pilot at Vista Springs.



Dr. Marcie Stoshak-Chavez



Lisa Izzo

"Originally, we used commercially available programs from YouTube and other sources, but now we're in the process of curating the experiences," said Dr. Stoshak-Chavez. "If a patient is anxious, they may want a meditative experience, like watching the Northern Lights, which is very relaxing. Or they may want to revisit a place where they grew up. There is a variety of different content available."

While many users express happiness with the programs, which usually last about 10 minutes, Centric is using its mobile app to collect less subjective data as well. "Our mobile app is unique in that it can collect vital signs from the user both before and after the experience; we monitor oximetry, respiration and more," said Dr. Stoshak-Chavez.

"It also keeps track of what medications they are on, and when they were last used," she added, "as well as records their answers about how they are feeling, if they have anxiety, and where they are on a pain scale. There are a lot of different data points."

Though the pilot is in its early stages, Centric hopes to compile this data in dashboard form to monitor how the adjunctive distraction therapy is working. "Though it's a very small-scale program, we're hoping to determine if there has been a decrease in medication or anxiety following these experiences, and to track if it is truly helping," said Dr. Stoshak-Chavez.

"End-of-life care is a really difficult time, not only for the patients, but for their family members," she added. "We want to see if we can use virtual reality as a distraction to what is happening, and to possibly decrease the amount of opioids used, which would allow patients to be more present with their loved ones."

The project, which was funded by Microsoft, is well-liked by patients and their families, and Dr. Stoshak-Chavez said that down the road, Centric may look at a way to provide a more shared experience, perhaps using multiple headsets so that all family members can participate. In the meantime, Vista Springs is considering using the technology in more of their assisted living facilities.

"The feedback our community members are giving is amazing, so we're hoping to expand it even further," said Izzo. "When it's over, they ask, 'Does it have to end?' They are loving where they were."

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