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OPEN ONLINE EDUCATION: TRANSLATING DEMENTIA KNOWLEDGE TO NON-TRADITIONAL SETTINGS AND STUDENTS

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Objectives: A diagnosis of dementia brings concern about the likely course of symptoms and what to expect, alongside behaviour changes which are hard to understand or accept. In the age care industry, a shortage of skilled staff means that care is often provided by people whose knowledge of dementia may be limited. People with dementia and their carers may have never considered the relationship between brain and behaviour, and when this knowledge suddenly becomes relevant, many have little idea where to look beyond internet searches and media reports.

To address this need, the Wicking Centre created a free online course covering basic science about the brain, the diseases that cause dementia and how they affect people. The Understanding Dementia Massive Open Online Course (UD MOOC), run for nine weeks once or twice a year, blends prepared audiovisual materials, readings and support from Centre staff, to build a community of knowledge around dementia and its issues.

Delivering the MOOC also requires an interdisciplinary team of content experts to engage with participants by addressing their questions in public discussion forums. As the course progresses, the "Ask an Expert" discussion areas accumulate with questions on any and every aspect of dementia, care and neuroscience. Most fall into one or more of the following categories:

1. Aspects covered by later MOOC modules – people may enrol with "burning questions", and post them in the Introduction section without realising they will be addressed by later content. The response needs to ensure persistence with the MOOC to see the content in its designed context.

2. Arising from observation – carers and people with dementia will highlight a behaviour or symptom which puzzles or interests them. The response usually ties this to the neuroscience of the brain and/or an aspect of the pathology of the relevant dementia(s).

3. Clinical questions relating to diagnosis and care – usually from family members and carers. Responses make clear disclaimers about not offering clinical advice, and are restricted to factual information which may be of use in making decisions or understanding diagnoses, and always recommend seeking medically qualified advice.

4. Prevention / cause / therapeutic / cure questions, usually driven by social media or mainstream media. Responses touch on the relevant evidence base, and where relevant recommend the Preventing Dementia MOOC, run in alternation with the UD MOOC.

5. Neuroscience questions – non-dementia aspects of brain function or neuroscience. These are the easiest to answer for academics used to working in a teaching context.

We present an analysis of participant "Ask an Expert" questions and the design of an online resource of dementia questions and answers, intended as a companion to the UD MOOC.

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