



IJCAIP Winter Supplementary Issue: Part 3

## Responses to Who Cares?

An ethnodrama preview held on September 23, 2015  
Lower Denton Theatre, Acadia University

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The evaluation of audience and actor perceptions about the ethnodrama preview *Who Cares?* was planned to assess reception of the content (messages about food and eating issues associated with aging and caregiving), and the use of drama in knowledge mobilization (KM) of research findings.

The three evaluation questions and feedback are given below. Information to answer these questions was collected in a number of ways.

- during the performance, Cathy Morley (CM) sat at the side of the theatre so that she could watch both the stage and the audience members' body positions and facial expressions.
- student volunteers (who served as greeters, ushers, video camera operators, and listeners in the audience) made (anonymous) notes of conversations with audience members before and after the performance, and at the reception.
- notes of conversations CM had following the performance with community members, faculty and dietitian colleagues, and students.
- review of the video of audience feedback recorded following the performance.
- solicited student attendee feedback via email.
- interviews with actors, Paula Rockwell (PR) and Robert Seale (RS).

**Question 1:** How, if at all, did the ethnodrama preview presentation of *Who Cares?* contribute to raising awareness about eating and feeding challenges of seniors and their family caregivers?

Watching the ethnodrama preview was successful in raising awareness. Student feedback revealed that watching the ethnodrama preview made them more aware of the multitude of issues involved in feeding an aging family member, and how this might influence their future work as dietitians or other health professionals. Some students reported that the stories presented paralleled what their own families had experienced/ were experiencing. All students who provided feedback wrote about the emotions that arose as they watched the show; these included 'emotionally intense', 'an emotional eye-opener', 'riveting and healing', 'touching', and 'loaded with love and heartbreak'. Some comments were:

- "I never realized that many elderly people are not getting enough nutrients and calories - especially when the media focuses on young- and middle-aged populations, and most diet information is centered on weight loss, muscle building, quick health tips, and low calorie foods. Very seldom, if ever, do you hear of the importance of making sure seniors get adequate calories because that age group just doesn't bring in the money. There's a huge difference between reading something, and actually seeing it acted out in front of you."
- "Sympathizing with the characters and more importantly, the truly complex stories involving feeding a loved one that were portrayed, made for a wonderful experience seen, heard, and felt by the audience."
- "After my Dad's surgery, our family dynamic related to food changed. Food is now something we try to avoid, instead of gather around. We expected surgery/recovery/carry on as before but ... we did not expect that his change in health status would completely alter our family and food dynamic."
- "Traditionally, dying and illness are portrayed negatively; the love and compassion in this play reinforced that sometimes the care provided by family members is irreplaceable. This makes me to wonder how our society and health care systems can provide the support family caregivers need?"
- "The ethnodrama (preview) vividly showed the situations that many elderly people face when they live alone. Watching it helped me realize that elder people can feel ignored, and they may see themselves as a burden on their families. I realized what a sad fact of life it is when children only come to take care of parents when they get sick. I thought of my parents and how I expect care **from** them, but I don't think about providing care **to** them. Thank you for doing this research; it is important to encourage people to consider the challenges involved in elder care."

**Question 2:** How, if at all, did the presentation of *Who Cares?* provide the opportunity for social comparison (i.e., affirm for audience members that their family members' experiences were shared by others)?

Audience members, during the discussion period and at the reception, stated that they or someone they knew had experiences comparable to those represented in the performance. One student wrote, "It made me think about my 80-year-old grandmother with whom my family has experienced a number of the situations enacted." Another wrote, "One older couple I spoke with said it was nice to know that many others have experienced what they are going through because there were not too many with whom they could discuss their situation."

**Question 3:** What was the audience/actors' feedback on using theatre in knowledge mobilization (KM)?

Observations of the audience during the performance were that they were engaged with the presentation; some leaned forward in their seats indicating connectedness with the actors and the stories. No one looked bored or distracted, and many audience members were teary during the performance. Facial expressions during the song indicated appreciation for the performance and the importance of the lyrics. The audience laughed at the appropriate times.

Students reported that in watching a play, they felt they would have greater recall of research findings over time, more than from reading a research paper. Another wrote, "I truly believe that this will be a powerful message to the public."

Verbal and written feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Suggestions to develop the play further were to:

- add additional stories/vignettes yet do not make the overall show too long
- add the voices of seniors who are experiencing loss of independence in feeding/eating
- add the voices of young caregivers (e.g., grandchildren)
- retain theatrical elements (scenes, musical interludes, and a vocal performance); do not add other elements.

Suggestions to expand options for presenting the show were to present to a variety of audiences including caregiver support groups, and at the annual conference of Dietitians of Canada and at meetings of other health professional associations. Another suggestion to make use of the stories portrayed in the show was to present video segments in a study guide format for use in self- and group study, and student training.

Actors (PR and RS) reported feeling honoured to have presented the stories of real people (rather than fictional). They indicated that the more we discussed the play (during rehearsals and in the debrief), the more they learned about the people upon whom the characters were based. They had had personal family experiences with the subject of the play, and were concerned about the demands on families and the health care system (feeding specifically, and caregiving generally) with the aging population.

The actors reflected on their observations about the potential for ethnodrama in raising awareness and building support. Paula wrote, "I feel very deeply about this topic and the next generation and their aging parents/loved ones. I jumped on board because of my personal experience and because we need to get information to the future caregivers, which by the look of the demographics, will largely be family members. I enjoy collaboration with like minds and talents. Robert wrote, "I dealt with these issues (and by 'dealt', I mean 'barely coped' - and not very well) before I lost both of my parents to Alzheimer's. Thankfully, at least, they died in their children's arms. I hope this show is of some informational value to others, because I got NO help or actionable information, and I felt very alone. I'm doing this because it is worthwhile, topical, and needs to be dealt with now - in a proactive way."

Paula and Robert considered theatre (live or as film) an edu-taining way to provide information for and to support families and individuals. Both reported interest in staying connected as plans for the show evolved.

The idea of creating a film version of the completed ethnodrama was suggested as this could be seen by a greater number of people in different venues, it could be viewed more than once if desired, and would have greater permanence compared to the fleeting nature of a touring theatre production.

### **And in the end...**

Feedback from audience members, students, and the actors supports continuing to develop the ethnodrama related to food, eating, feeding and nutrition issues for people who are aging and their family caregivers. There is more research to be done toward creating conditions to hear the voices and stories of families and caregivers. As a nutrition educator/activist, I (CM) want to see ethnodrama in performance and film formats to move us beyond 'wringing of hands' and 'tut-tutting' about the challenges for families to putting in place senior- and caregiver-identified programs, services, resources, and other supports that will reduce malnutrition risk, caregiver burden, and institutionalization rates. The preview ethnodrama, "Who Cares?" showed the value of presenting the realities of families and seniors in emotionally and compelling ways. It is one step toward developing and offering the kind of food and nutrition-related help that can help.

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