Active Aging and Self-Esteem

Bonita L. Marks, Ph.D, FACSM

This video provides superficial insights into the daily life of a handful of female residents living in an affluent elder-care facility in the Northeast. It focuses on the interactions between these residents and the beauty salon employees and provides some self-revelations and personal opinions. These personal reflections of the residential sample are this video’s most endearing, beneficial quality. The old women are articulate and insightful; their comments will strike a chord of resonance in any empathetic viewer. The film relates—from the residents’ perspective—the importance of maintaining a sense of dignity as one ages within an institutional setting. The beauty shop is one venue that facilitates that need. This video definitely is not a “fluff” piece and demonstrates that, at least for some, the beauty shop experience can be just as important as the work, exercise, or other recreational opportunities routinely offered in life-care institutions. It also conveys the prevalence of depression among female nursing home residents.

The film is an appropriate length—under 30 minutes. The quality of the visuals and sound are good, but many of the transitions to new scenes are choppy. The repetitive, overly sweet musical background becomes irritating, reminiscent of the musical score used to parody the elder lifestyle in the movie Cocoon. The constant interspersing of images of passing clouds, presumably designed to relay passage of time in a leisurely fashion, is severely overused and more like a reminder that these residents will soon be
in heaven. The excessive use of these two artistic endeavors does accomplish one thing: It negatively reinforces the notion that nursing home life is simply a meaningless waiting-to-die station. Ironically, this was one of the concerns stated by a resident when she praised part-time work opportunities rather than bingo games to ‘pass time.’

A weakness in the documentary is that it represents the opinions of only a few female residents and one of their daughters in one nursing home. It provides no insight into the residents’ backgrounds or why they are living in an institutional environment. The importance of family is minimized. The film states that 298 out of 300 female residents “regularly” visit the beauty parlor; however, it is unclear whether this is due to an administrative directive or if it is by patient choice. There are no residents or family members portrayed who may have differing opinions as to the worth of the beauty salon visits. No men are interviewed as to their perception of the beauty salon visitation, their own barbershop experiences, or other social activities. If this film’s intent is to promote the hairdressing business for elderly women, it does so. If this film’s intent is to provide an educational tool for elder-care providers, then an introductory narrative and concluding statement by a qualified health care professional versed on the topic of self-esteem and self-worth would be a wise addition. The interview with the beauty salon director does not accomplish this and is often redundant because she expresses what the residents have already stated. The chatty interactions between one beauty salon attendant and some of the residents, while intended to be friendly, are often harsh because some comments seem insensitive, derogatory, and condescending, regardless of the explanatory “teasing” nature of the comments offered afterwards by the salon attendant. Referring to a resident as a “bag of bones” is unprofessional under any circumstances.

If this film were prefaced with an educational commentary, it would be a good training video to sensitize elder care workers (and students training to enter the field) to the importance of maintaining self-esteem and self-worth within institutionalized living. The beauty shop visit is a unique situation that may assist in accomplishing this goal, one that may be overlooked or viewed merely as a vanity experience. This film could be marketed to colleges and universities that have gerontology programs as an adjunct educational film, which would promote class discussions on nursing home residents’ self-esteem, self-worth, and expectations of daily life in an institutional life-care facility. Other appropriate audiences would include medical students, medical residents, nursing students, and ancillary care providers in nursing homes.

Bonita L. Marks, Ph.D, FACSM
Associate Professor in Exercise Physiology,
UNC-Chapel Hill, and Post-Doctoral Research Fellow
Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
Box 3119
Duke University Medical Center
Durham, NC 27710
E-mail: bonita.marks@duke.edu