Research

Adult day groups: addressing older people’s needs for activity and companionship

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Objective: Adult day groups (ADGs) are used by older adults living at home in the community in Australia. Their aim is to prevent social isolation and to maintain independence through supporting social networks and providing a program of activities that enhance the physical, intellectual and social well-being of the participants and carers. The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of and reasons why older people attend ADGs.

Methods: An ethnographic study of four ADGs in Victoria, Australia was conducted over a 4-month period. The study included observation of the four ADGs and interviews with eight clients, comprising five women and three men.

Findings: Four major themes were derived from data analysis. The first was related to the importance of companionship with staff and clients of the ADGs. The second revealed how participants valued keeping occupied in activities not achievable at home, while the third identified how home was experienced as a place where time passed slowly and there were insufficient things to do. Lastly, participants identified dissatisfactions with ADGs.

Conclusion: Community based programs that foster companionship and meaningful and purposeful occupations in older age are desirable. Improvements to ADGs to better meet the occupational and activity needs of older people living at home are suggested.

Key words: activity participation, ageing, well-being.

Introduction

Day centres, or adult day groups (ADGs), as they are known in Australia [1], focus on maintaining an individual’s ability to live at home in the community by providing a planned program of activities directed at enhancing skills required for daily living. These activities also provide support and social interaction as well as respite for both the individual and their carer [1].

Van Beveren and Hetherington [2] argued that as the population ages, policy makers and service providers will require extensive knowledge of clients attending day centres in order to provide meaningful and appropriate programs to meet the needs of specific client groups. The Department of Human Services [1] outlined in their progress report on ADGs that service providers need to access knowledge and expertise from special services to assist in the development of ADGs that meet the needs of their client population. A review of the literature indicated a lack of research into day centres and ADGs and, in particular, participants’ experiences of these services, prompting this study of older people’s experiences of ADGs. A clearer understanding of participants’ experiences of ADGs will enable policy makers and service providers to better understand the circumstances and needs of the population they serve.

Background

The population of Australia is ageing. With lower fertility rates and increasing longevity, the proportion of people over 65 years across the total population is rising [3]. The Victorian Government has adopted a departmental plan to support older people to remain in their own homes [4]. However, in remaining at home, older people are faced with several concerns. These include living safely and independently, opportunities for social contact, and the availability of informal and formal support. One service that supports older people to live at home with a focus on enhancing skills required for daily living is the ADGs.

In the initial stages of the study one researcher (TT) conducted database searches using CINAHL, Ageline, MEDLINE and Sociological Abstracts with ageing, day centres, adult day centres and activities as the key terms between 1980 and 2001. This search established that research on day centre programs or ADGs for older people around the world has focused on the areas of dementia and behavioural problems [5,6], comparison of dementia specific and non-dementia programs [7], carer respite [8], program structure, planning and development [9,10], costs of the programs [11], and utility for disabled older people [12]. Research into participants’ experiences is small and very specific. A Canadian article by van Beveren and Hetherington [13] examined the amount and type of research on day centre programs for older people conducted between 1980 and 1993. They identified a lack of descriptive studies. They argued such studies are important for the development of effective, holistic day centre programs. Another review of day centre studies published after 1975 was conducted by Gaughler and Zarit [14]. They argued that attention to clients’ needs, flexible hours of opening and improved research and practice are needed to improve the overall effectiveness of day centre programs. Hashizume and Kanagawa [15] conducted a study...
Table 1: Outline of the four centres observed including the days and hours open, the cost to attend, the services provided, the staff and the daily routine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Days open</td>
<td>Mon, Wed, Fri</td>
<td>Tues, Thurs, Fri</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Tues, Thurs (PM only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours open</td>
<td>9:30–2:30PM</td>
<td>10–3PM</td>
<td>10–2:30PM</td>
<td>10–3:30PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost to attend</td>
<td>$7.50</td>
<td>$11.50</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
<td>$2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service provided:</td>
<td>Transport (taxi or volunteer drivers)</td>
<td>Transport (taxi or the ADGs bus). Three course meal (hot or cold) including orange juice. Morning and afternoon tea including biscuits.</td>
<td>Bus or taxi transport. Three course cooked meal. Morning and afternoon tea including raisin toast, all activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff role</td>
<td>Coordinator: three nurse activity staff, art teacher, others have basic training. Volunteers (&gt;3)</td>
<td>Coordinator: Occupational Therapist Activity staff (&gt;1); basic training, one volunteer</td>
<td>Coordinator: Community development officer. Activity staff (&gt;2); basic training</td>
<td>Coordinator (&gt;1), activity staff (&gt;1); basic training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily routine first observation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>Morning tea</td>
<td>Morning tea</td>
<td>Staff briefing</td>
<td>Arrival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td>Morning tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Morning tea</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet time/activity/cards</td>
<td>Quiz</td>
<td>Bingo</td>
<td>Guest speaker</td>
<td>Afternoon tea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afternoon tea</td>
<td>Afternoon tea</td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>Departure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Departure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Second observation</td>
<td>Arrival and morning tea</td>
<td>Arrival and morning tea</td>
<td>Staff briefing</td>
<td>Arrival and morning tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>Exercises</td>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft</td>
<td>Sing-a-long, lunch</td>
<td>Morning tea, cooking</td>
<td>Guest speaker</td>
<td>Afternoon tea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Word game/cards</td>
<td>Lunch, discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free time, discussion/cards</td>
<td></td>
<td>Departure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Afternoon tea, departure</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Exploring the correlation between adult day centre programs and the quality of life of ambulatory, frail older people in Japan. They concluded that adult day centre programs in Japan may be more suited to female rather than male participants and emphasised the need for further research into individual needs. An early Australian study of ADGs in Melbourne [16] found that social support functions dominated over the ‘therapeutic’ or physical health function. A Swedish study [17] of older people’s experience of being occupied and spending time at a day centre program found that day centres were a meeting place where social contact and participation in occupations were important and contributed to the health and well-being of their participants.

A small qualitative study investigating the impact of day centre activities from participants’ perspectives was conducted in South Africa [18]. The authors reported that women valued the day centre as a place where they had something to do and where they could form good relationships. The programs provided meaning and purpose for participants through engagement in simple everyday activities including cooking, cleaning and sewing.

In summary, the small number of descriptive studies on day centre programs or ADGs demonstrate the need for research on the significance of social programs for older people and the need to value clients as individuals. Research in Australia on the extent to which ADGs meet the emotional, physical and social needs of clients is lacking. This study aimed to examine the experience and meanings older people attribute to participating in ADGs.

Method

This study used a qualitative research design, ethnography, using observation and interview. Ethnography is a methodology stemming from anthropology with the goal of explaining and describing the structure and content of social or cultural groups [19,20].

Setting

The setting for this study was four different ADGs in Melbourne (Victoria, Australia) providing day long programs consisting of activities interspersed with tea breaks and meals, and offering a variety of transport options (Table 1). The daily routine was planned prior to the day commencing.

Participants were selected from ADG clients who volunteered to be involved in the study and who were best able to reflect on their experiences of the ADGs, those with a diagnosis of dementia were excluded. Eight clients were interviewed in total, two from each centre. This resulted in three men and five women between the ages of 69 and 94 years. Five of the participants lived alone, two lived with their spouses and one lived in a group home. They had been attending their centres from between 3 and 16 years.

Data collection

Two methods of data collection were used in this study; observation and in-depth interviewing. Each observation was followed by interviews. Observations at centre A and centre B were followed by four corresponding interviews with Jim, Con, Ethel and Nelly (pseudonyms). Observations at centre C and D were followed by interviews with Oliver, Ellen, Roma and Gert (pseudonyms).
During observations the data collected were recorded in field notes and observation charts. Interviews were tape-recorded and guided by an interview schedule (Table 2). Topics covered in the interviews included past and present interests, a memorable experience of the ADGs, reasons for attending, and the strengths, weaknesses and other experiences of the ADGs. The researcher (TT) kept a journal throughout the data collection period containing reflections and ideas arising from the data and relevant methodological issues.

Data analysis
Data analysis started with the initial observation and interview and was ongoing throughout the study. The field notes, observation charts and verbatim transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory method called 'open coding' [21]. The initial steps called for conceptualising the data. Sentences were established as the meaning unit and an initial coding scheme was developed. Data were moved into categories and then subthemes were created. Revisions were made in discussion between the two researchers, and four major categories with associated subthemes were identified (Table 3).

Results
The four themes relevant to older people’s experiences of ADGs and to their need for activity and companionship are presented here. The themes are: importance of companionship, keeping occupied, limitations of home, and dissatisfaction with ADGs.

Importance of companionship
All the participants in this study described the social component, or companionship, through the ADGs as valuable. The first subtheme identified pertained to the participants’ experience of the staff and clients as being exceptional people, the ‘pick of the crop’. It was evident that the staff and clients’ attitudes and behaviours played a significant role in establishing the social milieu and atmosphere of the ADGs. Tom used the term ‘pick of the crop’, saying:

‘... it is the older people that are going there [they] are the pick of the crop ... I include myself in that’. He explained: ‘I mean with everyone, the clerical staff and the volunteers, a great lot of people, really great people’.

Roma also rated the staff highly, they were ‘thoughtful’ and considerate of her needs and the needs of the other clients. She explained:

‘Well, the first thing is the girls that look after us. They are the most ... you couldn’t get anybody more thoughtful than what they are.

The effects of staff skills on the group, the activity and the atmosphere became apparent during observations. Field notes from centre A demonstrated how one staff member encouraged the clients to engage in an activity establishing the mood of the group:

The leader engaged the clients making use of eye contact and enthusiasm, this encouraged the group members to

Table 2: Interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time start:</th>
<th>Time finish:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social demographics:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of birth:</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country of birth:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Referral method:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership of other community groups:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Other supports:</td>
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Opening questions:
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I will be discussing and exploring with you your experiences of activity support services but first I’d like to ask you about your past and present interests. Can you tell me about your past interests? And now? How do you enjoy yourself generally? And in a group? Can you tell me about the most memorable time you’ve had at this centre? Can you tell me how you got involved in this group? What were the circumstances? What affects your attendance at this group? If you miss a day what is this like for you?

General themes to be covered will include:
- Experiences of the activity support service; limitations and strengths
- Reasons for attending
- Experience of the activities offered in the program
- Experience of relationships with other participants and the staff
- Experience of the benefits of attending the service
- Perspective on the costs involved in attending the service
- Perspective on the food at the service

Final questions. This is a fun question. Looking back at your involvement in the program what fruit might symbolise what this service means to you and why?

Table 3: Final categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of companionship</td>
<td>The ‘pick of the crop’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being and talking with others</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support in the company of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping occupied</td>
<td>Keeping busy is good for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time was organised when I’m busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occupations are a source of satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting out of the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Ageing in place’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alternatively, Con believed that attending the ADGs helped explained: ‘. . . it fills up the day and no one gets bored . . .’.

Keeping occupied assisted participants to organise and occupy their time. Filling in time prevented boredom, as Gert concluded they were ‘good for you’ and prevented the loss of skills, included they were ‘good for you’ and prevented the loss of skills, being ‘good for people’ was frequently mentioned by participants. Nelly reflected on the quizzes at her centre. She commented: ‘. . . quiz time’ made you use your brain’. It makes you think . . . use your brain . . . otherwise you . . . wouldn’t be thinking, you know, what’s the capital of China?

The experiences of participants illustrated their need to support and be supported or cared for by others. Tom commented:

I mean, we’ve got someone to talk to. Now [Oliver] . . . as soon as we get there we discuss races . . . different races and different jockeys.

The fact that there is somebody to teach you, and someone with an interest [in] me, and is interested in everyone around you too . . . I thinks it’s . . . more than a bit of support, [a] great support for me.

Ellen talked of going on outings ‘somewhere interesting’ and taking photos to show other clients. Reminiscing over the photos ‘cheered up’ herself and the others.

Support was also shown through the basic care provided by staff. This was illustrated during an observation at centre B:

On arrival the group was met . . . [the staff] helped people off the bus, and walked with people needing assistance into the activities room to a seat. Others who wandered were directed or instructed to sit down . . .

The observations and participants’ descriptions demonstrated the participants’ ongoing desire for companionship with other people. Being and talking with others also enabled the participants to continue previously enjoyed activities.

**Keeping occupied**

Participants identified that keeping busy or occupied was good for them, time was organised when they were busy and the programs were a source of satisfaction. This notion of things being ‘good for people’ was frequently mentioned by participants. Nelly reflected on the quizzes at her centre. She concluded they were ‘good for you’ and prevented the loss of skills, saying:

It makes you think . . . use your brain . . . otherwise you . . . wouldn’t be thinking, you know, what’s the capital of China?

Keeping occupied assisted participants to organise and occupy their time. Filling in time prevented boredom, as Gert explained: ‘. . . it fills up the day and no one gets bored . . .’. Alternatively, Con believed that attending the ADGs helped time pass:

. . . much quicker . . . whereas at home it’s slow . . . when I’m at [centre B] I talk to people that sit next to me, and before you know where you are it’s, it’s already lunchtime. The time goes much quicker.

Another aspect of keeping occupied related to the idea that when activities are regularly undertaken, they are something to look forward to. Gert believed it was ‘good to have something to look forward to’, it connected her to the future and prevented her becoming ‘a dull fellow’. Keeping occupied also brought feelings of satisfaction. Participants spoke warmly and positively about participating in the ADGs. Con enjoyed engaging in the ADGs program, the type of activities was not of great concern to him. He explained:

I look forward to [attending] because we’re doing, . . . all sorts . . . and ab I quite enjoy it . . . You do other things that you don’t normally do at home.

Ethel also enjoyed the ADGs because it satisfied her need to learn. She said ‘. . . I like it on account of learning what I’ve learnt’. The strength of Roma’s following comment illustrated the pleasure she experienced in attending the ADGs. It was her day out to meet people, ‘everything about it I like. That’s my day out . . . I just hope there doesn’t come a day when I don’t have to go’.

In summary, the participants asserted that engaging in the ADG activities, such as quizzes, ‘makes you use your brain’. Furthermore, through keeping occupied, their time was organised, it prevented boredom and helped time pass. They wanted to be occupied in their later years and believed it was good for them, while staying at home could be constraining.

**Limitations of home**

The third theme related to the participants’ discussions of home. Participants spoke of their physical frailty limiting their ability to leave home. In these circumstances, home was often perceived as a trap offering little stimulation and fulfilment. Going out, or getting out of the house, were ideas that most participants believed were important in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. For some participants the home held little reward or stimulation. Con explained:

Number one, I get away from home. I’m sitting all day long . . . just listening to the radio or listen[ing] to the TV, I get out of the house. That’s really worth a lot.

Home was not stimulating enough for Tom. Tom was used to a life of hard work and the fact that life at home now consisted of ‘pottering’ appeared very distressing. He said:

Other days you’re just getting up and . . . you’re pottering . . . I find that very harrowing.

Attending the ADGs 1 day per week gave Roma some relief from being home alone, it ‘brightened up’ her life. She said; ‘You know, it’s very morbid on your own’. Roma described how she only left the house twice a week, ‘other than . . . going to the supermarket once a week and the [ADGs]. I don’t go anywhere else’.

In summary, participants’ conversations revealed when they were not able to get out of the house. For example, on a non-program day, the home was boring, unstimulating and even distressing. At home they were more involved with mundane,
everyday tasks. This was not always their preferred choice, but an outcome associated with physical disabilities and limited avenues for activity participation. However, attending the ADGs also had some limitations.

Dissatisfaction with adult day group services
Participants reflected on the limitations of the ADGs. Three main dissatisfactions were raised: the other clients, the food and the activities. Nelly stated that one of the limitations of her centre was that some of the clients ‘got under her skin’. She coped with this by avoiding some people but she accepted the situation and carried on.

Con and Oliver both expressed a strong dislike for the food, particularly the main courses. Although their words were strong, they were not demanding that the ADGs change; they accepted that the food was their problem. Their needs were simple. Con said:

As far as I’m concerned, the food’s shocking (laugh). I don’t eat it. I eat the soup that’s all . . . . I’m quite happy to have some bread and butter.

Oliver commented:

I only have soup and sweets, the salad to me is like eating grass. You may as well go out and eat the lawn.

Another limitation mentioned by Con and Oliver was the activities. Con believed the activities at the ADGs were ‘child-like’, while Oliver thought they were ‘all right’ or ‘not so hot’. Surprisingly, they both continued to attend and appeared to accept, and even enjoy, the program offered by the ADGs. They both indicated it was better than staying at home, indeed Oliver stated if he could, he would attend 52 weeks a year.

For the majority of the participants the benefits of attending far outweighed the dissatisfactions they experienced at the ADGs. When Tom was asked about any limitations of the ADGs, he said:

I think [the clients] feel so well cared for, that if anything happens there like that, they accept it as being best for them.

In summary, the structure and content of the ADGs, which depended to a great degree on the skills and attitudes of the staff, facilitated relationships and provided participants with an opportunity to converse with others. Companionship with staff and other clients brought opportunities to give and receive support. Keeping occupied was a source of satisfaction for the participants and attending the ADGs, for the most part, provided participants with enjoyment and pleasure. But the satisfaction was more than just enjoyment, it came from being engaged in a program that was meaningful and purposeful. While the participants wanted to get out of the house and mostly enjoyed attending the ADGs, they were not without dissatisfactions.

Discussion
One of the most commonly reported reasons for attending the ADGs by participants was for companionship with others. It appears that having the company of others assisted the well-being of the participant’s lives. Research into social activity and older people suggests that social activity positively impacts on older people’s sense of well-being [17,22] and having friends or contact with other people also contributes to well-being [23,24]. Attending the ADGs enabled participants to be with and talk to others. Some participants reported that being with others prevented loneliness, while others spoke of talking with others as a way of maintaining their interests. Companionship also brought opportunities to support and be supported by others. Another important finding was that the warm social atmosphere at the ADGs was often associated with the qualities and skills of the staff. This points to the importance of staff training, a factor highlighted in the literature [25,26].

A second aspect of the participants’ experiences arose in their reference to being active and keeping occupied. Being engaged in an occupation is a key concept of occupational therapy. Townsend [27] defined occupations as everything people do to occupy themselves. Research has shown that being actively engaged in occupations is linked to health and well-being [18,22,28]. Participants specifically noted how their cognitive function was maintained through engaging in activities such as quizzes. According to Reed et al. [29], selected, purposeful occupations can assist a person to maintain and prevent the loss of skills.

The literature indicates that through activities people organise their time and are connected to the past, present and future [22,28,30]. Participants in this study spoke of the ADGs as a means of filling in time, it helped time to pass quickly, and was something to look forward to. It was apparent that filling in time, passing time quickly, and looking forward to attending the ADGs appealed to participants.

Keeping occupied was also a source of satisfaction for the participants of this study. Participants enjoyed attending the ADGs, but their satisfaction was more than just enjoyment, it came from being engaged in an activity that fulfilled a purpose. While the quotes from Oliver and Con concerning the activities being ‘not so hot’ and ‘childlike’, their satisfaction appeared to be derived from simply attending the program, it was better than staying at home. This concept of purposeful occupations as a source of satisfaction aligns with key assumptions of occupational therapy [27,30]. The question of age-appropriate activity selection was also raised. These participants suggested that services need to address the occupational needs of older clients and develop programs that are sensitive to individual interests, providing activities that have greater meaning and purpose. Knowledge of, and responsiveness to, the diverse range of client interests can be built into programs without incurring huge costs. A study by Howie et al. [31] observed how recognition of older people’s skills and interests through purposeful occupations, in health services or community environments, can support ‘the development, expression, and maintenance of acceptable personal and social identities . . . central to experiences of well-being and adaptation to life events’ (p. 453).

The third theme was identified as the limitations of home. Due to the participants’ physical limitations, external environmental
hazards and diminished opportunities for social contact and occupation in the home, the participants described home as constraining, a place where time passed slowly and there was little to do. This notion can be contrasted with studies by Davidson et al. [32], Rowles [33], Russell [34] and Slater [35]. These researchers asserted that the home for older people is a place of security, a source of independence and personal control. However, Davidson et al. stated when getting out becomes difficult the home loses its ability to be a place of security, a source of independence and personal control, supporting the findings of this study.

Participants’ accounts of attending the ADGs indicated that their experiences of being at home were not fully satisfying. Some of the participants indicated that attending ADGs once a week was insufficient. This suggests that, despite government policies directed at maintaining older people living at home, further consideration needs to be given to extending services for older people, in particular services that assist people with functional disabilities to get out of home and participate in programs that foster companionship and engagement in purposeful activities.

This study raises several questions about the ability of ADGs to meet the companionship and activity needs of older people. It suggests there is a need to increase transport for older people to get out of home. ADGs might be more beneficial to older people if they offered shorter days on a more frequent basis. This suggests there is a need to increase transport for older people, in particular services that assist people with functional disabilities to get out of home and participate in programs that foster companionship and engagement in purposeful activities.

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Key Points
- Adult day groups provide older people with opportunities for companionship and activities.
- Home was observed to be constraining to participants of the study.
- Improvements to adult day groups are suggested to better meet the needs of older people living at home.

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