

# Submission to the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

## Submission from the Music Broadcasting Society of Queensland Ltd

Made by Gary Thorpe OAM, General Manager

### Introduction

About 15 years ago the Music Broadcasting Society of Queensland (MBSQ) became aware of the problem of social isolation and loneliness experienced by elderly people living in aged care and in the community. We were particularly concerned that research showed a link between social isolation and depression, one of the forerunners of dementia. The aged are very vulnerable to the negative impacts of social isolation.

### Silver Memories – a radio station designed to break down social isolation

As a not-for-profit community music broadcasting organisation operating digital and FM radio stations (4MBS Classic FM), we realised we were in a unique position to do something about the problem of social isolation and loneliness, and in 2007 we started a new “nostalgia” radio station for the elderly called “Silver Memories”. In the early years, Silver Memories was only accessible on a sub-carrier frequency picked up by special radios due to there being no spare FM frequency available in Brisbane. We sold over 8000 of these special Silver Memories radios over the next couple of years until the supply ran out, and received strongly appreciative feedback for the service. This demonstrated to us a significant need for such a service.

### Why “nostalgia” music?

Our own research found that Reminiscence Therapy is an internationally recognised way of addressing social isolation in the aged. In addition, the benefit of age-appropriate music as a powerful Reminiscence Therapy tool is clearly documented. *See [Combining music and reminiscence therapy interventions for wellbeing in elderly populations: A systematic review](#), in *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* Volume 28, August 2017, Pages 18-25.* Reminiscence Therapy of this type is a valuable non-pharmacological tool with potentially substantial mental health benefits. We note that the impact of overmedication in the use of drugs to treat depression in the aged care context was identified recently by the Royal Commission into Aged Care.

Now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year, Silver Memories plays music that our listeners would have enjoyed when they were aged in their teens to mid-twenties. This music, a highly effective Reminiscence Therapy tool, revives happy memories from the past and can increase feelings of peace and contentment and being valued as a person.

As a multi award-winning broadcasting organisation with over 40 years’ experience, we are in an ideal position to deliver music-based Reminiscence Therapy via the Silver Memories radio station directly into people’s lives, 24 hours a day, to provide companionship and a sense of connectedness and relieve isolation.

The content, format and presentation of Silver Memories is carefully curated to provide familiarity and structure to the day. Feedback and song request opportunities allow personal input from listeners. Regular segments and feature programs at set times and differentiated weekend programming give shape to the week. On Sundays we broadcast a program of hymns for people who can’t attend a church service. Silver Memories announcers are themselves aged in their later years so the listeners can relate to them. *Recent research* has highlighted the beneficial effect of the medium of traditional radio with its element of communication from the announcer (Krause, A (2020) *The Role and Impact of Radio Listening Practices in Older Adults’ Everyday Lives* Published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 18 December 2020). Silver Memories is

based on this principle. Our announcers are trained in their delivery and scripting to bring listeners a familiar sense of connection beyond their memories and connection with the music.

We made the decision not to have advertising on Silver Memories as this can be intrusive for older people. This decision, whilst in the best interests of our listeners, has obviously deprived us of a revenue source that would help fund the station.

### **Silver Memories in residential aged care**

After Silver Memories launched in Brisbane, many enquiries were received from outside of the broadcast range, so with the support of a generous philanthropist who covered the satellite fee for the first year, we were able to transmit Silver Memories throughout Australia via satellite. Silver Memories is now received in 160 aged care homes across Australia, 90 of these being in Queensland. The service is accessed via a dedicated channel on the TV set in residents' rooms or common areas.

The ability of residents to enjoy the service communally provides added social benefit and experience. The sound of specific songs and music from residents' pasts provides triggers for shared discussion, enhancing conversation and social interaction.

### **Visual and audio content**

Visual stimulation is another important aspect of Reminiscence Therapy (International Journal of Social and Humanistic Computing (IJSHC), Vol. 1, No. 1, 2008). Accordingly, Silver Memories programming is further enhanced by a curated visual component. With the audio stream we transmit calming and appropriate images which appear on the TV screen, generating memories and increasing engagement. We have developed an extensive image library with thousands of images for this purpose. As part of the service, we provide extensive resources for aged care staff to use alongside the broadcast to increase engagement for the residents.

### **Silver Memories for people living at home**

In 2020 we launched the Silver Memories app for people to receive the service in their own home. Available for a small monthly fee on iPads and android devices, the app provides 24 hours a day age-appropriate music with friendly older announcers sending birthday calls, playing requests, and reminiscing about earlier times. The app also allows access to thousands of images, quizzes and other engagement tools.

The Silver Memories service is a unique, world-leading Queensland innovation for addressing social isolation and loneliness in the aged, one of the most vulnerable sections of the community. The development and expansion of Silver Memories has been helped by a number of foundations, philanthropic individuals and government, including Arts Queensland.

### **Silver Memories in hospital**

Several hospitals in Queensland and South Australia have installed Silver Memories for their older patients to enjoy and report that it is very effective.

### **Research into Silver Memories Benefits**

In 2009, the University of Queensland conducted research into the benefits of listening to Silver Memories and found that it provided statistically significant improvements in wellbeing and reduction in loneliness. The research was published in the international journal "Activities, Adaptation and Aging".

Some comments from Silver Memories listeners surveyed as part of the study include:

'I don't feel lonely anymore'

'I look forward to listening every day'

'I turn it on first thing in the morning and turn it off when I go to bed'

'Silver Memories is my daily companion'

In 2017, a second UQ research project found that listening to Silver Memories addressed the effects of 'sundowning', the increased anxiety in the late afternoon felt by people living with dementia.

In 2018, the Australian Department of Health commissioned a third research project on Silver Memories. Dr Catherine Travers oversaw the research. This 12-month project showed that listening to Silver Memories each day resulted in statistically significant reductions in depression, anxiety, and aggression in the aged.

In 2011, Silver Memories was the subject of a Churchill Fellowship investigating the use of music in the management of dementia and related issues. The Fellowship involved visiting eight research centres around the world dealing in the use of music for Reminiscence Therapy. The resulting research showed that Silver Memories was a world leading approach to addressing issues such as social isolation and depression because of its 24 hour a day accessibility, ease of operation and the sense of community it creates.

In 2015 Silver Memories was a finalist in the International Dementia Awards held in the UK.

A summary of the above-mentioned three research projects is attached. The full reports can be provided on request.

### **Conclusion**

We would welcome discussions with appropriate government bodies about subsidising the installation of the satellite dish at aged care facilities and hospitals. We would also welcome discussions with relevant bodies about promoting the use of the app for elderly people living in the community. We realise this may also be a discussion about providing devices with the app pre-loaded. If Silver Memories was available via satellite to all aged care homes and hospitals throughout Queensland and via the app to aged people living at home, it would create a world-first approach to breaking down social isolation and loneliness.



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### Research papers on Silver Memories

1. Travers, Catherine and Bartlett, Helen (2010) 'An Exploratory Study of Carers' and Care Staff's Perspectives of Silver Memories —A Unique Radio Program for Older People', Activities Published in Activities, Adaptation & Aging, 34: 2, 135-147 Silver Memories: Implementation and Evaluation, Dr Catherine Travers, University of Queensland, 2009
2. Down Memory Lane, Dr Libby Flynn, University of Queensland, 2017
3. Department of Health Silver Memories Research Project 2017-18; Principal Researcher - Dr Catherine Travers, Research Manager, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, UQ (Summary of results attached)