

Research starts in the brain but works its way to the heart, says a University of Victoria health geographer whose studies of dementia and care across the lifespan have made her a passionate advocate for quality of life as people age.

“One of the wisdoms I hold is that communities that care for the most vulnerable persons are healthier for everyone who lives in them,” says Denise Cloutier, whose research into how people experience life—and death—in long-term care is done in partnership with residents, families, health authorities and other academic researchers.

Health geographers like Cloutier specialize in exploring the impact of physical surroundings and communities on our lives and sense of well-being. Nobody dreams of spending their last years in a care facility, acknowledges Cloutier. But much could be done to increase the feeling of “home” in those facilities, which house almost a third of Canadians over age 85.

“So much of the residential-care system is focused on quality of care not quality of life, on tasks instead of time spent with residents,”

says Cloutier. “Personally, I think that having someone to talk to—to hold your hand, take you to social activities, help with meals—may be more important than other tasks.”

The trend to contracting out food services is a perfect example, she says. It might make budgetary sense, but denies residents the familiar aromas of food cooking associated with “home.”

Of the 22,000 British Columbians in residential care interviewed in a recent report from the BC Seniors Advocate last fall, Cloutier notes that only 57 per cent reported that their facilities felt like home. Forty-six per cent said no one living with them felt like a close friend. Fewer than half said staff had time for friendly conversations.

“We need to find ways to help care workers address issues of quality of life more fully, encouraging them in their daily work to make a real difference in the lives of older persons. Insufficient budgets and evaluating staff solely on tasks completed or number of medications handed out interfere with that goal,” says Cloutier.

“Many staff go the extra mile every day to support quality of life for residents. But going

the extra mile for quality of life needs to be the goal every day not the exception. And staff need to be better supported in this aim.”