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On Lok Lifeways Gets into “Wii-hab”

By **NICHOLAS SAGER**

It has been dubbed “Wii-hab” and is hailed as the future of physical therapy. But to the elders at San Francisco’s On Lok Lifeways, it’s just plain fun. Program participants are now bowling, boxing and batting their way to better health and physical strength with the use of the Nintendo Wii gaming console. The Wii physical therapy program, first rolled out at On Lok Lifeways’ Gee center, has now been implemented in eight of On Lok Lifeways’ 10 senior centers across the Bay Area.

On Lok Lifeways founded and provides a Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE), and introduced the Wii as part of its innovative physical therapy program in March 2009. The Wii program was funded by grants from The Bothin Foundation and the president of On Lok’s board of directors, Teveia Barnes.

WII GETS RESULTS

Initial response to the program has been extremely positive: On Lok Lifeways’ physical therapists have reported on participants’ improved posture, endurance, strength, better initiation of movement and regained balance. Occupational therapists have found that using the Wii has enhanced elders’ hand-eye coordination and fine and gross motor skills, as well as concentration and mental acuity.

Another successful outcome is that the recreation, physical and occupational therapy departments are working together as a team to use the Wii technology and provide program participants with most complete physical therapy routine possible.

Many Wii program participants have also reported improved motor skills and body movement, especially in the upper extremities. A 75-year-old participant who has been at Lifeways’ Rose Center for the past 12 years says, “The Wii “helps me to exercise, moving my arms and fingers. I sometimes feel numb in my fingers and I feel the Wii helps to prevent it.”

Another participant, age 81, who has been at Lifeways’ Rose Center for six months, says, “Before I couldn’t use my left arm so much, but now I can move it better. I think the Wii really helped me.” Others have reported that the Wii makes them feel years younger, conjuring past memories of playing sports from their youth.

WII FOR SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL HEALTH

The rehabilitation staff anticipated positive therapeutic and physical outcomes, but the recreation therapy department reports numerous additional benefits, including improved self-esteem and sociability among Wii users. The staff has witnessed a palpable sense of excitement and accomplishment when a participant tries and succeeds at a new game. Onlookers gather around the Wii to cheer on their peers, which noticeably lifts the moods and spirits of the group, and helps those suffering from depression.

“The Wii system enables people with different levels of physical and cognitive ability to participate and interact with each other,” says On Lok physical therapist Rachael Pressel. “Our seniors have so much fun playing the games that they sometimes even forget their physical limitation or pain. Even better, they love cheering each other on and are motivated to perform well when it’s their turn to box or bowl. We couldn’t have imagined the added emotional benefits of this program.”

Another unexpected benefit has been the shortening of the generation gap between elders and their grandchildren. Often, there can be a lack of communication between grandparents and grandchildren, but the Wii has helped to improve intergenerational relations. Since many children and teenagers are familiar with Wii gaming, this opens up a link of communication with their grandparents. Additionally, since starting their new physical therapy routine, some program participants have become interested in this technology and have purchased the Wii for use at home.

The On Lok Lifeways’ Wii program has been so successful that On Lok has installed gaming consoles at eight of its centers. Physical therapists are using the Wii with elders (along with high tech mobility walkers) and recreation therapists and other staff members are also experimenting with a variety of different games to find those that are the most beneficial, adaptable and enjoyable for participants. At Lifeways’ Gee Center, a Wii competition between participants and staff has been planned, and a Lifeways-wide “Wii-Olympics” is under discussion. ❖

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On Lok Lifeways and other PACE centers provide a full continuum of medical and social services including primary and specialty care, routine preventative care, homecare, home-delivered meals, prescription drugs and adult day health. The PACE model has been so successful that it has been adopted as a Medicare program and has been replicated in 61 programs across 29 states. Participants pay no out-of-pocket costs if they are beneficiaries of both Medicare and Medi-Cal. For more information about On Lok Lifeways programs, please visit www.onlok.org or call 1-888-88-ON-LOK.

—N. S.