Aim: The aim of this study was to describe and compare the experiences of nursing staff caring for ethnic elderly persons suffering from dementia in an ethnic care setting and a Swedish-speaking care setting.

Background: The numbers of ethnic elderly persons who speaks only their native language and are suffering from dementia are growing. As the dementia progresses into its’ advanced stage the person suffering from dementia first loses the second language and later the native language and needs to be admitted to institutional care. In some municipalities in Sweden ethnic elders suffering from dementia receives care in an ethnic care setting where the persons’ native language is spoken, but most ethnic elders suffering from dementia receives care in Swedish-speaking institutions. In terms of communication this may be a challenge for the nursing staff.

Methods: The study has a qualitative approach with 27 semi-structured interviews. Data consist of 12 interviews with Finnish-speaking nursing staff working in a Finnish-speaking group home for persons suffering from dementia in Sweden and of 15 interviews with nursing staff working in Swedish-speaking group homes caring for non-Swedish older persons with dementia. The material is analysed with qualitative analysis.

Findings: The experiences of the nursing staff showed that caring for the patients in a Finnish-speaking environment meant that they could communicate with the patients in their native language, which in turn stimulated the cognitive, physiological and social abilities of the person with dementia. Besides the language, the Finnish-speaking nursing staff also included cultural aspects such as Finnish music, food and media into the daily life in the care. The nursing staff in the Swedish-speaking group homes, perceived that all patients received equal basic care, but as they did not speak the patients’ language communication was limited. The language barrier resulted in behavioural disturbances at times in the non-Swedish patients with dementia.

Implications: The two types of care settings were compared and besides a mutual language, the bilingual staff in the Finnish-speaking group home were able to include more of the cultural aspects which all together contributed to a sense of homeness for the Finnish elders with dementia. The care in the Swedish-speaking group homes was considered good and equal, but was also experienced as limited and frustrating by the Swedish-speaking nursing staff. Other strategies to communicate with the patients had were used and which will be further discussed.

Keywords: bilingual nursing, dementia, ethnic elders, qualitative