

MWA - Home and overseas paper – April 2014

Living with dementia

Dementia is a word that raises many emotions, often fear and denial. Some people liken our reluctance to talk openly about the disease to the way we used to whisper the word 'cancer' and assume that the less said, the better. But in the same way that most of us do not want to be defined by our health conditions, for example, we are not just our broken leg or our arthritic knees, so people living with dementia are more than their disease.

Many organisations working with and for people with dementia and their carers, are involved in a national campaign, the Dementia Challenge, to increase public awareness, to encourage people to seek help at an early stage, and to convince the public that there is life after a diagnosis.

What is Dementia?

Dementia refers to a set of symptoms which can include loss of memory, mood changes, and problems with communication and reasoning. Dementia is caused by diseases of the brain, the most common of which is Alzheimer's disease. Other types of dementia include vascular dementia which can occur when the oxygen supply to the brain fails, perhaps due to a stroke or a series of small strokes, dementia with Lewy bodies, which shares some characteristics with Parkinson's disease, and Pick's disease which results in personality and behaviour changes.

What are the symptoms?

Loss of short-term memory is often the first sign of dementia and it is what prompts most people to see their GP. Dementia is not just about losing your memory however. Dementia is a 'brain attack', so any function of the brain may be affected. It's worth remembering that dementia affects each person differently depending on other factors such as other medical conditions, the person's environment, their past life, or their diet.

Who gets dementia?

We should celebrate the fact that in the industrialised world, we are living longer – the number of people who will receive a letter from the Queen goes up and up! But it does mean that many of us will have to manage long term health conditions such as dementia. In the UK there are about 800,000 people (men and women) with dementia and it mainly affects people over the age of 65, with the likelihood increasing with age. In the age group 65 – 69, 1 in 100 will be affected; 70 – 79 years old, 1 in 25, and for those over 80, the estimate is 1 in 6. However, it is important to remember that dementia is not a natural part of ageing – not everyone who grows old will develop dementia and not everyone who develops dementia is old. Dementia can affect younger people and there are over 17,000 people in the UK under the age of 65 who have dementia.

Why get an early diagnosis?

People might think, "What's the point; there's no cure." Even some GPs (thankfully fewer and fewer) are reluctant to give a diagnosis. While it is true that there is no cure, there is still much that can be done to delay the symptoms, and as the disease progresses, there are services that can enable people to live independently or with a family carer. Research into drug therapies continues and some drugs have already shown to alleviate some of the symptoms in all stages of the disease.

There are also aids and adaptations that can make the home environment easier to manage. For example, a large wall clock that tells the date and day can help someone to keep appointments. 'Memory Services' run by the NHS and Social Services, help people living with dementia and their carers to navigate the system and take advantage of the help that is available including day activities, cafes and social events. More help is also available for carers to make sure that the pressures and feelings they experience are taken into account.

Can you prevent dementia?

Research continues into factors which predispose people to develop the condition but it is not clear what can be done to prevent dementia. Evidence does suggest that a healthy diet and lifestyle may protect against dementia. Exercising regularly, avoiding fatty foods, not smoking, drinking alcohol in moderation and keeping mentally and socially active in old age may help to reduce the risk.

Dementia Friendly Communities

The Alzheimer's Society, with funding from the government, has set out to train people to become Dementia Champions who in turn, pledge to deliver information sessions to friends, colleagues, families and neighbours, inviting them to become 'Dementia Friends'. The ambitious aim is to sign up one million Dementia Friends by 2015. Dementia Friends make a simple pledge to undertake one action, large or small, that will make life better for people living with dementia and their carers. A simple pledge could be to tell your MWA circle what you have learned, or perhaps simply to be a bit more patient in the supermarket queue if the older person ahead of you is fumbling over her change or her pin number!

The five key messages that we are being urged to hear and understand are:

- Dementia is not a natural part of ageing.
- Dementia is caused by brain diseases.
- It's not just about losing your memory.
- It's possible to live well with dementia.
- There's more to the person than the dementia.

National Dementia Week takes place from 18th to 24th May. Look out for public information messages and think about how you can make your neighbourhood or even your family, a friendly and supportive place.

For more information, contact the Alzheimer's Society's national helpline on 0300 222 11 22, or check their website at www.alzheimers.org.uk. You can also contact your local Age UK for information about a range of services in your area.

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