

A Physician Struggles with Dementia in ‘From the Other Side’



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Having empathy for those afflicted with an illness is a quality most healthcare professionals possess, but a sincere appreciation of the patient’s journey is not so apparent until we, ourselves, are similarly confronted. ‘From the Other Side’ details, with clarity, a very personal beginning to a journey that is faced with courage, hope, and the support of a caring family.

Although the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s dementia, as detailed in the article, was confronting, the sense of ‘hopelessness’ experienced as a clinician is turned into one of hope at the prospect of being able to ‘help with patient education’. Treatments are possible, and research continues, but Alzheimer’s dementia does not define the person. The will to live and make a difference is defiantly expressed here — ‘I can’t sit around, stop learning, and quit working’.

Worldwide (2020) 55 million people are diagnosed with this disease¹. In Australia (with estimated population of 26.7 million souls at the beginning of 2024) 421,000 Australians are currently living with all forms of dementia.² The need for education, highlighted in this article, is also recognised more broadly as essential, and is made freely available by some organisations^{1,2} to build understanding and to help those directly affected by this disease.

The contribution to this endeavour by those who have the disease, their family, and carers is essential. The importance of these contributions is echoed on the websites of institutions dedicated to finding the causes and ways to treat this illness.³ Citizen scientists are helping to unravel the complexities of Alzheimer’s disease and have been enlisted in a variety of studies, such as the EyseonALZ project which aimed to identify blocked capillaries in the brain using novel imaging techniques and thereby find ways of unblocking these blood vessels to restore cognitive function.⁴ Whilst all these endeavours are promising for the future, the therapeutic goals of managing symptoms, modifying the disease, and neuroprotection help to slow disease progression for the present.

The reluctance of someone with Alzheimer’s dementia to see that something is amiss is difficult, both for themselves and their family. The subtlety of the disease, as it imposes itself on the individual, the fear and guilt associated with it, and what that might mean for self, family, and friends, is exceedingly difficult to process, but this need not stop any of us from living a productive and full life. The support of family, friends, and carers in such circumstances is of paramount importance. It must be respectful and non-judgemental, preserve dignity, and be provided in a manner that does not blame or focus on the negative, and should always aim to help the individual to remember who they are. This is a continuing challenge, which the author acknowledges when reflecting upon his own father’s journey; ‘The family made adjustments to help “preserve his dignity” while ensuring we kept him safe’.

Pointing to the future, there are a number of avenues of research that show promise, including monoclonal antibodies for the prevention and the removal of beta-amyloid plaques, saracatinib to prevent the destruction of synapses and so reverse memory loss, inhibition of beta and gamma secretase enzymes involved in the production of beta-amyloid plaque, tau-aggregation inhibitors and vaccines to prevent tau tangles, medications aimed at the prevention of brain cell inflammation associated with Alzheimer’s disease, insulin resistance, heart and blood vessel health, hormone, and lifestyle choices beneficial for heart and circulatory health.⁵ ‘From the Other Side’ is a patient’s honest account of this difficult journey and conveys a message of hope for self, family, and the future.

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