



SUPPORT OLDER PERSONS' AWARENESS GO BLUE: 1 - 30 SEPTEMBER



UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA

Older Person's Awareness Week taking place in September creates an opportunity to highlight some of the challenges that the elderly face. Dementia is an illness which affects the elderly, although it is important to note that dementia is not a normal part of ageing. September as World Alzheimer's Month was launched in 2012 and this international campaign is used as a platform to create awareness and challenge stigma around the disease. According to Alzheimer's Disease International, there are almost 50 million people living with dementia worldwide and this figure is set to treble by 2050.

Dementia is a collective name for progressive degenerative brain syndromes which affect memory, thinking, behaviour and emotion. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia. Symptoms include memory loss, disorientation with time and place, difficulty with language, challenges performing familiar tasks as well as personality and mood changes.

In the first few stages of the disease, Alzheimer's specifically affects the short term memory. Whilst one may remember who their teacher was in grade one, they may not remember what they had for breakfast this morning.

Some illnesses and infections, such as a UTI, dehydration or depression can present with similar symptoms to that of dementia. This is why it is important to visit the doctor if any symptoms occur. The doctor would first rule out any physical causes of the symptoms before starting to look at the possibility of dementia. The theme for World Alzheimer's month this year is centred around the importance of an early diagnosis. An early diagnosis allows families to plan ahead; to sort out finances, wills, express their wishes for the future and allow them time to spend quality time with their loved ones. Early diagnosis provides the opportunity to seek necessary medical support and care. An early diagnosis also gives the symptoms a "name" and in some cases this can be a relief to know what one is dealing with.

It is important to remember that there is a natural ageing process and forgetfulness and slowed reactions are to be expected. From the age of about 30

our brains gradually shrink as a result of decreased blood flow, and although mental function becomes slower, it usually remains good. Dementia, however, is not a part of normal ageing. Although dementia is not a preventable or curable disease, there are certain things we can do to decrease our risk of developing dementia:

- Look after your heart (keeping blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes and weight under control)
- Be physically active
- Follow a healthy diet
- Keep your brain stimulated
- Be involved in social activities

We all have a role to play in de-stigmatising dementia and creating an environment of awareness, acceptance and support. There is still much discrimination in our communities about dementia which results in those living with dementia being abused, neglected and even murdered. In certain cultures people even believe that those living with dementia are cursed or bewitched. We need to educate our friends, our families and our communities that dementia is an illness that can affect anyone – it does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, education or wealth.

Members from one of Alzheimer's SA's support groups agreed that patience, a sense of humour and flexibility are crucial in caring for a loved one living with dementia. Carers need to care for themselves in order to care effectively for others. Taking time out, pursuing your own hobbies and interests, socialising with others, talking to a trusted friend and joining a support group can be good sources of support and self-care.

If you are concerned that you or a loved one may have some of the symptoms discussed, it is recommended that you make an appointment with your doctor. Dementia does not have to be a lonely disease and there is support available to people journeying with this. Alzheimer's SA provides services such as counselling, support groups, training and awareness programmes. You can contact us on 031 702 4321 (Pinetown) or 033 396 1011 (Pietermaritzburg).

Kim Hellberg,
Social worker, Alzheimer's South Africa

