

*Special Report*

## **Alzheimer's Disease - Will It Become An Epidemic?**

*By Karen Henderson*

---

*From the deeply forgetful we learn that love - not cognitive capacity - is the deepest human need and reality. In our aging society, an attitude of gratitude for those who have lost in large measure the very story of their lives is a necessity.*

—Stephen G. Post. President of The Institute for Research on Unlimited  
Love at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland

January is Alzheimer's Awareness Month in Canada and consequently, the media has been filled with articles, stories and research about this frightening condition. As the result of being the principal caregiver for a father with mixed dementia – vascular dementia and probable Alzheimer's disease, I have always been aware of and concerned about dementia. If you have attended any of my presentations, been a student in my classes or follow the content of this newsletter, you know that the subject of dementia is invariably present.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada is warning that the number of Canadians living with Alzheimer's disease or dementia is expected to swell to epidemic proportions within a generation. About half a million Canadians - 119,700 of them Quebecers - are affected. But based on a new study made public on January 5, the association predicts that within 25 years, the number of cases of Alzheimer's or a related dementia will more than double, ranging between one million and 1.3 million people. It is seen in all cultures, but affects more women. **Women account for 72 per cent of Canadians with Alzheimer's disease.**

Called *Rising Tide: The Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society*, the initial findings report the first new prevalence data since the 1991 Canadian Study on Health and Aging.

"These new data only reinforce the fact that Alzheimer's disease and related dementias are a rising concern in this country, an epidemic that has the potential to overwhelm the Canadian health-care system," Ray Congdon of the Alzheimer Society said in a statement.

### **Dementia is striking a growing number of boomers**

The report also states that of the half-million Canadians affected by various forms of dementia, about 71,000 – or almost 15 per cent – are under 65. Of those, 50,000 are 59 or younger.

"We know that we're finding far more individuals in their 50s and 60s who have dementia," said society CEO Scott Dudgeon. "We're talking about dementia generally, including Alzheimer's disease."

### **What are the diagnostic tests used for Alzheimer's disease?**

According to medical experts, there are no specific laboratory tests that can tell unequivocally that one has Alzheimer's disease. Brain imaging can detect lesions that can suggest a possible Alzheimer's case. A number of

tests need to be performed to eliminate other possible causes of Alzheimer's like symptoms. The diagnosis is done by memory and cognition performance evaluation using specific non-invasive tests. These tests assess learning and retention of short-term memory. They are very powerful and can distinguish normal aging-related memory deterioration from Alzheimer's marked memory and learning deterioration. Together with other indices derived from brain imaging, clinical and personal history as well as family observations, a physician is able to conclude whether or not an individual may be suffering from Alzheimer's symptoms.

### **Can the risk of developing Alzheimer's be dramatically reduced?**

What can individual Canadians do immediately to protect themselves? We have heard it before:

- Eat healthy and nutritious food – pass the fish please - and avoid common hazards in the typical modern diet
- Control your blood pressure and cholesterol
- Stay active physically and mentally
- Avoid harmful toxicants and pollutants
- Being socially engaged with family, friends and community
- Surf the web

### **What is research telling us?**

Extensive research has been going on around the world for many years. According to a report by Dr. Jack Diamond, Scientific Director, Alzheimer Society of Canada: "Almost invariably when Alzheimer's disease is mentioned, be it in the media or in medical reports, the words "for which there is no cure" appear with depressing regularity. The Conference on Clinical Trials on Alzheimer's disease (CTAD), the first of its kind, held in September 2008 in the historic School of Medicine in Montpellier, France, marked a significant change in the attitude implied by these words. As this Conference made clear, within five to seven years we may well have treatments for Alzheimer's disease that could halt, or certainly significantly slow down its progression, a position justifying the active search for treatments that could go further, and reverse the effects of the disease..... Whatever the answer, another stumbling block is emerging in the search for a cure. But hopes remain high, and rightly so. The future is still more promising now in regard to a cure for Alzheimer's disease than at any other time in our history."

### **Dementia affects the whole family**

*"At first we fought back. We fought the disease, we fought her, we fought the system, we fought ourselves. But then something began to sneak up on us. Slowly, we learned that Alzheimer's is not the end of a life. And that it need not be the end of a relationship. Alzheimer's, we found, is pretty much like anything else life brings one's way. It is change, and change brings with it opportunity. In this case, the opportunity to develop new, even deeper connections than we had had before.*

*This is not to say that the experience was not difficult. It was almost always profoundly difficult, and by turns saddening, frightening, exhausting, and infuriating. But it proved also to be enlivening and enriching, and at times even hilarious. Ours was a broader, more complex, and far more richly rewarding experience than we had anticipated, or been led to believe awaited us."* — A caregiver