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Doctor and you: Seek help when the mind slows

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By Theresa Tan



PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG, DR RESHMA MERCHANT

While more people are now aware of dementia, getting affected individuals to seek medical treatment remains an uphill task.

Some are in denial and insist they are well, says Dr Chan Kin Ming of the Chan KM Geriatric and Medical Clinic at Gleneagles Medical Centre.

The geriatrician adds: "Families have often asked me to masquerade as their friend or colleague so that their parents are willing to see me. Others tell their parents that the medicine is actually a brain tonic or some vitamins for their bodies."

Also, some families feel that dementia — which results in the brain function deteriorating — is part of the normal ageing process and refuse to send their parents for further assessment, says Dr Reshma Merchant (above, right), head of general medicine and a geriatrician at the National University Hospital.

Experts say medicines can alleviate the symptoms and delay the progression of some types of dementia.

Also, when families learn more about the illness, they are better equipped to help their loved ones deal with it.

The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, where the accumulation of protein fragments in the brain causes brain cells to die. Patients are also short of some important chemicals, which transmit information from one cell to another in the brain, Dr Merchant explains.

Alzheimer's is a slow progressive disease, unlike vascular dementia, which is caused by small strokes in the brain. Patients suffering from vascular dementia may find their ability to function declining rapidly.

Presently, there is no cure for dementia, which is characterized by memory loss, personality or mood changes and problems with communicating.

With a rapidly ageing society, more Singaporean families may be weighed down by the burden of dementia in the years ahead.

By 2030, 70,000 people are expected to be afflicted, up from the 25,000 in 2008, estimates the Ministry of Health.

Findings from the National Mental Health Survey of the Elderly in 2003 show that 5.2 per cent of people aged 60 and above suffer from dementia.

As the likelihood of contracting dementia increases with age, women are at a higher risk as they live longer. Also, the loss of female hormones during menopause may be a contributing factor.

But all is not lost.

Eating a well-balanced and healthy diet can help control risk factors such as high cholesterol levels, obesity and diabetes. Keeping physically, mentally and socially active also helps.

Dr Chan sums it up: "The mind is like a muscle, use it or lose it."

Family turned upside down

Dementia affects family members more than the patients, say geriatricians.

Dr Chan Kin Ming says: "Dementia patients do not realise that they are difficult, agitated, aggressive or even abusive. They often deny or have forgotten what they have done and are not amenable to reasoning. So families are often at their wits' end."

Some patients may sleep in the day – instead of at night – and roam about the house screaming, knocking on doors and disturbing other family members when they are asleep, adds Dr Reshma Merchant.

Dr Chan treated an elderly woman who suspected her daughter-in-law and maid of stealing and refused to leave the house because she wanted to guard her belongings.

The old lady was paranoid and had turned her family's life upside down. Her loved ones were on the verge of sending her to a nursing home.

She called her children hourly while they were at work, asking them the same questions, such as "Are you coming home for dinner?"

Dr Chan says: "Her accusations caused a lot of misunderstanding among her family members and this led to many quarrels."

To make matters worse, she couldn't sleep at night and would roam about the house in the dark, occasionally breaking things and alarming her family.

But the situation improved when the woman responded to medication. She stopped accusing her daughter-in-law of stealing and was even willing to attend a dementia day care centre, which gave her family some respite.

Her children learnt more about dementia and rallied to help her cope.

Dr Chan adds: "There was much forgiveness and understanding. The anger they felt soon gave way to sympathy and an eagerness to help. And the family does not see a need to put their mum into a nursing home now."