

World Alzheimer's Day shines a light on a devastating disease

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

World Alzheimer's Day was on Sept. 21 and according to the Alzheimer's Society of Canada, nearly 50 million people live with Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia around the world. A German psychiatrist, Alois Alzheimer, was the first to identify the disease while treating a German woman back in 1901, and of course, the disease was named after him.

Alzheimer's Disease International, which supports those suffering from the disease and conducts outreach to educate and expedite related policies, introduced World Alzheimer's Day on Sept. 21, 1994, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of their founding. They coordinate the day around the world, working with member organizations and associations to organize events and create awareness. ADI introduced September as World Alzheimer's Month back in 2012.

While Alzheimer's Disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for between 60 to 80 per cent of dementia cases, there are other types, including; vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, and frontotemporal dementia. There are also other rarer forms of dementia, like atypical Alzheimer's disease (frontal variant Alzheimer's disease and posterior cortical atrophy), CADASIL, corticobasal syndrome, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, HIV-associated neurocognitive disorder, Huntington's disease, normal pressure hydrocephalus, and progressive supranuclear palsy. Some famous figures who have suffered from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia include; James Doohan, Robin Williams, Charles Bronson, Peter Falk, and Estelle Getty among others.

With Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia being so widespread globally, few people haven't been touched by it, whether it's a family member, a friend or a colleague. It is a truly devastating disease, slowly robbing people who suffer from it of their memories and ultimately their lives. It has also touched my family, as my step mother's mom has suffered from vascular dementia for several years and is now in palliative care. Vascular dementia occurs when the vascular system, a network of blood vessels, which supplies the brain with oxygen, is blocked, diseased or bleeding due to strokes or atherosclerosis. If this blood, with the oxygen and nutrients it provides, is prevented from reaching the brain, the affected brain cells die, leading to dementia. Fifteen to 25 per cent of dementia cases are vascular dementia, according to researchers.

However, one of the bright spots my stepmom mentions in her mom's struggle with vascular dementia is a supportive gesture from the Alzheimer's Society of Toronto, who filled an mp3 player with her mom's favourite music and delivered it to her where she's staying so she can enjoy the songs on it. CEO and co-founder of Senior Helpers (an in-home senior care service) Peter Ross, said that they believe communicating effectively with someone with Alzheimer's is not just about using language.

"It is connecting through their senses such as touch, visual cues and sound," he says.

Ross' assertion was proven correct in the case of my stepmom's mom, as having this mp3 player has triggered memories of the songs for her, especially the tune "As Time Goes By," written by Herman Hupfeld, and first performed by Dooley Wilson in the film Casablanca. My stepmom's mother sang along to it, remembering most of the words, and my stepmom has a video of her singing on her iPhone, which has now become a treasured memento. Needless to say, it has brought her a lot of joy since she's gotten the player, in an otherwise awful time.

New treatments come out with continued research and according to the Mayo Clinic, experts are cautious but hopeful about developing treatments that can stop or delay the progression of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. One of these is Leqembi, a disease modifying therapy approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration this year, and yet to be approved by Health Canada, who are currently reviewing it. Hopefully they find a cure for this insidious disease sooner rather than later.

For more information on World Alzheimer's Day, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, and the programs and services

they offer to sufferers and their families and caregivers, visit the Alzheimer's Society of Canada at www.alzheimer.ca.