

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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## “Alzheimer’s Disease Possibly Linked to a Virus”

Close to six million people suffer with Alzheimer’s disease (AD) and it is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States and a new case is diagnosed every 70 seconds. Despite years of research, the underlying cause of AD is up for debate and unknown. Dr Richard Isaacson, director of the Alzheimer's Prevention Clinic at Weill Cornell Medicine and New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, talks about the contagion theory of Alzheimer’s disease. Could Alzheimer disease be caused by an infection? Some very interesting research calls into question the precise etiology of Alzheimer’s disease. Physicians and scientists have been taught for decades that amyloid causes Alzheimer’s disease. Although that may be true, different people may take different roads to developing the disease. Some people may be on the metabolic road; for example, having diabetes increases the Alzheimer’s disease risk two-fold. What about hormones and the menopause transition? Women are in the fast lane for acquiring AD. There is current discussion concerning the infectious theory of AD. To wit, herpes viruses are ubiquitous. Many people have herpes virus infections, but in some people, perhaps based on epigenetics and the environmental interaction with a person's genes, infection with the herpes virus puts them on the fast track to Alzheimer’s disease. Previously, we have thought of amyloid as the primary causative factor for Alzheimer disease. However, amyloid is also released in response to an infection in the brain. So, perhaps that virus or another virus, or a bacterium, or another germ that has yet to be isolated, may put someone at an increased risk to Alzheimer’s disease. So, we need to ask, “Could AD be contagious?” We all have likely heard about prions. Prion proteins are nonliving infectious particles that cause Creutzfeldt-Jakob, or mad cow, disease, as well as a variety of other conditions. What about Alzheimer’s disease? Surprisingly, if you look at the statistics, the spouses of persons with Alzheimer disease are at a 1.6-fold risk of having the disease themselves. Also, neurosurgeons are at a much higher risk for Alzheimer’s disease than the general population. Similarly, Alzheimer’s disease had also been linked to herpes virus cold sores. Why is this? Isaacson says, “We're not sure yet.” Another new study shows "people who develop Alzheimer's disease late in life may have the same gene mutations linked to the inherited, early onset form of the condition." Yet, another new study suggests that a brain-clotting plaque (amyloid) linked to Alzheimer's disease may cause cognitive decline even in healthy people.

In the America that I love, we realize that AD cannot be prevented, cured or even slowed. This makes an even stronger case for additional research to fight the pain and suffering.

**Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.**

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

[rhowesmd@hughes.net](mailto:rhowesmd@hughes.net) | [www.iwillfindthecure.org](http://www.iwillfindthecure.org)

