

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Dementia Can Begin Early”

A frightening thought is the loss of one's memory. An estimated 5.2 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease (AD) or some other form of dementia and those numbers will jump to 13.8 million by 2050. Until now, the general consensus was that the onset of cognitive decline, associated with dementia, did not begin until 60. A study published in the *British Medical Journal*, conducted by an Inserm research team, shows that our memory and capacity for reasoning and understanding start to decline at the age of 45. The study estimated 43.8 million cases of dementia worldwide in 2016, which represented an increase of 117% from the number of cases in 1990 (20.2 million). The highest age-standardized prevalence rates of dementia were reported in Turkey and Brazil, and the lowest were found in Nigeria and Ghana. Dementia was the fifth-leading cause of mortality worldwide in 2016. The age-standardized prevalence of dementia was 17% higher among women vs men in 2016, and the number of women who died of dementia was nearly double that of men. Tragically, nearly a half-million new Alzheimer's cases will be diagnosed annually. The prevalence of dementia approximately doubled for every 5-year increase in age between 50 and 80 years. Increased life expectancy implies a significant rise in the number of elderly people. clinical studies demonstrate a correlation between the presence of amyloid plaques in the brain and the severity of cognitive decline. It would seem that these amyloid plaques are found in the brains of young adults. Actually, there are three main drugs (Aricept, or donepezil; Exelon, or rivastigmine; and Reminyl, Razadyne or galantamine) which are currently approved for use in mild-to-moderate Alzheimer's disease. Not one of the six clinical trials examined by Italian researchers found that the drugs significantly reduced the rate of progression from mild cognitive impairment (MCI) to dementia. Estimates are that upwards of one in four with MCI are given these drugs, which can cause ulcers, gastric bleeding, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, insomnia, fatigue, fainting, muscle cramps, etc. Giving Alzheimer's drugs to people with early memory problems did not delay the onset of the disease. Bitter debates have erupted over questionable benefits and enormous costs. Drug companies must stop trying to “shame” us into asking our physicians to prescribe ineffective medications for our affected family members. A cure is desperately needed but current prospects are poor.

In the America that I love, we realize that as life expectancy continues to increase, understanding the correlation between cognitive decline and age is one of the challenges of the 21st century. We urgently need more clinical trials to find truly effective drugs to slow the onset of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Be careful of duplicitous "campaigns of persuasion."

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