

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Dementia Is On The Rise”

Approximately 6 million Americans have dementia and the prevalence is increasing. Tragically, nearly a half-million new Alzheimer's cases will be diagnosed annually. An estimated 1 million people in the US have mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and about 110 million older adults who are aging normally have some kind of cognitive complaint. Memory continues to decline as individuals age, with the downward slope depending on genetic makeup and lifestyle factors. There are no disease-modifying treatments for age-related memory loss. Some studies suggest that lifestyle factors are even more important than genetic factors, and one of those major areas is nutrition. Up to half of all Alzheimer's Disease cases worldwide are potentially attributable to seven major risk factors: depression/stress, obesity, hypertension, diabetes, physical inactivity, smoking, and low education/cognitive inactivity. We also know that dementia can start early. 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). Dementia was the fifth-leading cause of mortality worldwide in 2016. The number of women who died of dementia was nearly double that of men. 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. Heated debates have erupted over questionable benefits and enormous costs. Research on pomegranates has been going on for some time now. It started with animal studies that showed that pomegranates and other berries have a positive effect on memory. Although those results were encouraging, the study was relatively small and continued for only a month. A new study also had a randomized, double-blind design — but it was larger (enrolling 261 participants) and longer (it continued for 1 year). Basically, what happened was that the pomegranate-juice group maintained a certain level, but the placebo group declined; and the between-group effect size was moderate at 0.45.

In the America that I love, we realize that the bottom line is we don't know exactly what's going on and dementia continues to increase at an alarming rate.

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