

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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

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“Dementia Review 2020”

With the current presidential campaigns in full swing, the subject of dementia has been raised as it relates to both candidates. A little review is in order. As we age, we experience many physical and cognitive changes. Older people often have a decrease in recall memory. This is called normal memory loss and is part of the expected changes with aging. When you have troubles with memory – but they don’t interfere with your daily activities – this is called mild cognitive impairment. Your doctor might recommend the MoCA, or Montreal Cognitive Assessment test, which screens for memory problems and helps determine if more evaluation is needed. Dementia tends to be a slow-moving progression that occurs over months or years. Depression can also cause memory changes, particularly as we get older. Alzheimer’s dementia is the most common type of dementia, followed by vascular dementia. They have similar symptoms: confusion, getting lost, forgetting close friends or family, or an inability to do calculations like balance the checkbook. And, as with any disease or disease group, dementia is not a “character flaw,” and the term should not be used to criticize a person. Dementia is a serious medical diagnosis. Approximately 6 million Americans have dementia and nearly a half-million new Alzheimer’s cases will be diagnosed annually. Dementia, which is not technically a disease but a term for impaired ability to think, remember or make decisions, is one of the most feared impairments of old age. About 5% of those age 71 to 79 have dementia, and about 37% of those about 90 years old live with it. However, experts have discovered a revolutionary “new treatment” that makes you live longer. It enhances your memory and makes you more creative. It makes you look more attractive. It keeps you slim and lowers food cravings. It protects you from cancer and dementia. It wards off colds and the flu. It lowers your risk of heart attacks and stroke, not to mention diabetes. That new treatment is not a pill; it is simply “sleep!” According to tons of robust data, it really does have the potential to do all the amazing things listed above—and is likely to be essential for anyone looking to avoid dementia. Sleep is an active period where tons of important biological processes take place. One of the most vital is memory consolidation. Babies and toddlers need so much sleep (11-14 hours) while adults can get by on shorter periods (7-9 hours). Sleep deprivation can lead to other types of dementia and various chronic illnesses.

In the America that I love, we should learn what we can do to avoid dementia and support those with dementia. Dementia is increasing at an alarming rate.

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 | www.iwillfindthecure.org

