

### **What is dementia?**

Dementia is a general term for a brain disorder that produces widespread deterioration of mental function and social capabilities. Dementia is a chronic condition and is usually, but not always, progressive. One of the first signs of a dementia is usually memory loss, although it is important to note that some forgetfulness is normal with aging. Although the onset of a dementia is usually gradual, family members may notice sudden changes after life changing events such as the death of a spouse or moving house.

### **What causes dementia?**

Dementia has various causes. The most common cause is Alzheimer's dementia, which is characterized by symptoms such as poor recall of recent events, difficulty finding words or naming objects, getting lost in familiar surroundings, behavioural or emotional changes.

Vascular dementia, caused by several small strokes, is the second most common form of dementia. Some disorders which primarily affect motor functioning, such as Parkinson's disease and Huntington's disease, are also associated with cognitive problems which may progress to a dementia.

### **The importance of an early diagnosis**

Family members often delay in getting help from professionals when they notice a deterioration in their elderly family member's functioning because they believe there is no treatment for dementia. Although it is true that many forms of dementia are irreversible, some dementias can be reversed with the appropriate treatment, while the course of others can be slowed down. Early and correct diagnosis is therefore of the utmost importance.

### **Dementia: A family tragedy**

Dementia, whatever its cause, is a tragedy for the victim and for family and friends. Although patients are often spared awareness of the extent of their difficulties in the later stages, many patients realize that they are losing their cognitive abilities in the early stages. This could lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression, which in turn could exacerbate cognitive difficulties such as memory loss. Effective treatment of co-morbid psychiatric conditions such as clinical depression or anxiety disorders, through psychotherapy and/or medication is therefore very important.

Families know the dementia sufferer best, and when given some encouragement, even young children can often come up with new and creative ways to ease the lives of the caregivers and bring some happiness into the patient's day.

After the shock of the diagnosis has subsided and a routine of care has been established, it is important that all members of the family continue to live their own lives as well as sharing in the care of the patient if that is their wish. It is all too common for the bulk of the care to fall on the shoulders of one person, usually a woman relative. This situation should be avoided from the outset to avoid caregiver burnout.

### **Care-giver burn-out**

Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. It occurs when you feel overwhelmed and unable to meet constant demands. As the stress continues, you begin to lose the interest or motivation that led you to take on a certain role in the first place. Burnout reduces your productivity and saps your energy, leaving you feeling increasingly helpless, hopeless, cynical, and resentful. Eventually, you may feel like you have nothing more to give.

Signs of caregiver burnout include feeling as if:

- Every day is a bad day.
- Caring for your relative with dementia and your other responsibilities at home or work seems like a total waste of energy.
- You're exhausted all the time.
- The majority of your day is spent on tasks you find either mind-numbingly dull or overwhelming.
- You feel like nothing you do makes a difference or is appreciated.

The negative effects of burnout spill over into every area of life – including your home and social life. Burnout can also cause long-term changes to your body that make you vulnerable to illnesses like colds and flu. Because of its many consequences, it's important to deal with burnout right away. Caregivers need to have their coping abilities and stress levels monitored so that they can receive assistance and respite from their role before they collapse either physically or emotionally.