

Zach Harward

JOMC 50
Service Learning Project

Alzheimer's Disease

“Now, are you in school?” my grandmother asked. “Yes,” I said. “I go to UNC in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.” “Oh good,” she said. My grandmother sat on the edge of her bed in her nightgown and stared ahead as she thought for a moment. “What do you study?,” she asked. “Anthropology,” I answered. She would soon ask me, “Now, what is that again?” I had known what question was coming next because this was the same conversation I had every time I had been to visit her in the nursing home. My grandmother was suffering from dementia caused by Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative condition of the brain and is the number one cause of dementia in elderly people. Alzheimer's affects not only basic memory, but the ability to recall the names of loved ones, getting lost in places you once knew well and becoming confused in once familiar situations. In later stages of Alzheimer's, the patient is unable to take care of themselves and requires full-time supervision.

Alzheimer's disease was first described by Dr. Alois Alzheimer in 1906. Upon performing the autopsy of a woman in her mid-fifties who had died suffering from memory loss, confusion and basic dementia, Dr. Alzheimer found abnormal deposits (plaques) and tangled bundles of nerve fibers in her brain. (National Mental Health Association) Even today, these must be found in an autopsy to officially declare Alzheimer's disease as the cause of death.

Alzheimer's disease, or AD, is nothing new and is not a rare disease. Over 4 million Americans have AD. One of the major risk factors for AD is age. While new advances in health technology continue to push back the average life expectancy, AD will

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continue to become more prevalent. Right now, about half of Americans 85 years of age and above suffer from AD (Alzheimer's Association).

Age is not the only risk factor for AD. Heredity, past head trauma, hormone replacement therapy and even a history of high blood pressure or cholesterol could contribute to your risk of AD. (Alzheimer's: Understanding the Disease)

Many of the current studies being done on AD are to discover potential causes in the hope that people will be able to avoid them.

There is currently no cure for AD, but there scientists have many hopes for future discoveries. There are medications that can help prolong the healthy life of Alzheimer's patients by slowing down the spread of the disease or lessening its symptoms.

Alzheimer's disease doesn't just affect the person who has the disease. It can weigh heavily on the patient's family and friends as well. Right now, one in ten families have a relative with AD. (Alzheimer's Association)

I know from first-hand experience that having a person with AD in your family can be physically and emotionally taxing. As the disease progresses, it can be very difficult to deal with having a loved one forget your name and who you are.

AD patients often undergo changes of temperament and attitude as they become more confused and afraid. The repetition of repeatedly explaining simple facts and procedures along with the sadness of seeing a family member's memory slip away can be very stressful.

Often primary caregivers can become overwhelmed with stress and experience depression, frequent crying, weight fluctuations and increased irritability and

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anger.(Alzheimer's Caregiving) It is important to watch caregivers for these symptoms of increased stress.

With the number of AD cases growing each year, the need for Alzheimer's education is at an all-time high. Even if you do not become a victim of Alzheimer's disease, it is still likely that a friend or relative will suffer from it in your lifetime.

For my informational website on AD, I am targeting current caregivers of a person with AD, family members of AD patients and people of all ages who think someone they know may be exhibiting the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

To assure the best possible treatment of AD, it's best to educate yourself with its symptoms. Early detection of AD will give the family and the patient more time to plan for the future. In many cases, persons suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease may notice possible signs of their condition but may be afraid to talk to anyone about what they are experiencing. This puts the responsibility of checking for symptoms on friends and relatives. Including links to comprehensive lists of AD symptoms and checklists of early-stage warning signs on my website will be helpful to those who believe they may know someone with AD.

People searching for information on the internet about Alzheimer's disease are often times caregivers and family members of AD patients. Often time these people can forget their own mental and physical health while devoting all their energy to the care of a loved one. That is why my site will include links specifically geared towards the support of caregivers.

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I hope that my personal experience with the disease will help me be able understand the overlooked informational needs of those who may be in similar situations.