After the diagnosis

Referral to the Alzheimer Society for support and services

People diagnosed with dementia, their families and the health-care providers who support them all recognize that early access to ongoing, reliable support and information is critical when living with the many challenges that dementia brings.

To address this need, the Alzheimer Society developed First Link®, a referral program for physicians, health and community services providers that connects individuals and their families to learning, services and support as early as possible in the disease process.

Family physicians have an important role in identifying caregiver problems and providing direct and ongoing support to caregivers in their day-to-day responsibilities. Invariably, patients and families want to know about the progression of the disease, risk factors, and available treatments.

As a family physician, you can:
- Ensure regular follow-up visits to assess their physical and emotional health and coping skills;
- Provide further communication about the diagnosis and information during the whole course of the disease, particularly when dealing with challenging symptoms;
- Assist caregivers in mobilizing family and friends;
- Facilitate referrals to appropriate services and resources.

Canadian consensus on the diagnosis and treatment of dementia

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About Dementia

Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias

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- There are many other dementias including Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia (including Pick’s disease), Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and mixed dementia.

Dementia numbers in Canada

- 564,000 Canadians are living with dementia right now.
- 65% of Canadians over the age of 65 who have dementia are women.
- 25,000 new cases of dementia are diagnosed each year in Canada.
- 937,000 Canadians will be living with dementia in 15 years.
- The average family physician in Canada has 30 to 40 patients with dementia.
- $10.4 billion is spent by Canadians annually to care for people with dementia.
- Smoking increases the risk of having dementia by 45%.

Encouraging early diagnosis

Benefits of early diagnosis

- Early diagnosis allows people with dementia and their families to receive timely practical information, advice and support. Only through receiving a diagnosis can they access available drug and non-drug therapies that may improve their cognition and enhance their quality of life.
- Early therapeutic interventions can be effective in improving cognitive function, treating depression, improving caregiver mood, and delaying institutionalization. Some of these interventions may be more effective when started earlier in the disease course.
- Undetected dementia places older adults at risk for delirium, motor vehicle accidents, medication errors, and financial difficulties to name a few.
- Early detection of dementia provides an opportunity for the individual to adjust to the diagnosis and to participate actively in planning for the future which can reduce the heavy societal costs associated with institutionalization.

The story of Jim Mann

In 2007, Jim Mann, a former airline employee who had traveled the world, froze in the middle of a small regional airport. He had no idea where he was, or what to do next.

After a few tests, Jim’s doctor told him he had dementia. After more rigorous testing, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, a common form of dementia. He was 58 years old.

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“I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to look”, says Jim. “Since then, I’ve been told I’m too young, too healthy, too capable to have the disease. It can be a hidden illness for years, but when you have it, the impact is unquestionable.”

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Assessing patients with dementia

Early detection of cognitive impairment

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The major hurdles to diagnosing dementia in family practice are:

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1 Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2016.
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Help for today. Hope for tomorrow...

Cover: Clock drawing test result indicative of dementia.
Source: Institute of Psychiatry, London, UK