

Early diagnosis of dementia is key to receiving treatment and support

Recognize the symptoms...and see your doctor

Two and a half years ago, Jim Mann, a former airline employee who had travelled the world, froze in the middle of a small regional airport in the United States. He had no idea where he was, or what to do next. A few weeks later at home, he drove his wife on a routine trip to the drugstore and blanked on how to get there, within yards of the destination.

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

Jim was lucky. When he described his symptoms, the doctor, who had known Jim for years, knew they were unusual for Jim. During more extensive testing, however, one specialist questioned the diagnosis, saying, "You don't look like you have Alzheimer's disease."

"I wasn't sure how I was supposed to look," Jim says. "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."

Less than 25% of Alzheimer cases diagnosed in Canada

According to figures released in January 2009 by the Alzheimer Society, one in 11 Canadian seniors has dementia. What's more troubling, an estimated 70,000 Canadians under the age of 65 are also affected.

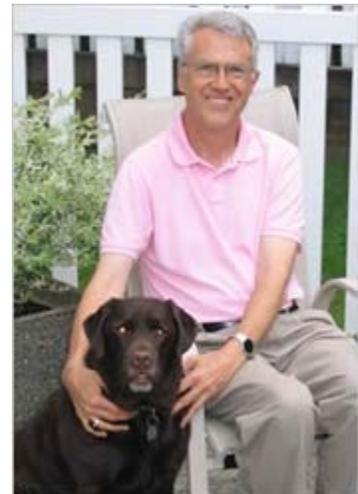
Yet less than 25 per cent of Alzheimer cases in Canada are diagnosed and treated.

"Many Canadian doctors think that since you can't cure, or slow the progression of dementia, a clinical diagnosis is less important," says Dr. Jack Diamond, the Alzheimer Society's Scientific Director. "But delay in diagnosis means that people don't get the right care and are not identified for updates. New treatments, for example, are fast approaching the time when they'll be available for doctors to prescribe."

Diagnosis takes time, but is worth the effort to get help for entire family

Diagnosing Alzheimer's disease is, admittedly, not easy. "The process is one of eliminating other possibilities," explains Kathy Hickman, Education Manager for the Alzheimer Society. "Even with improved diagnostic tools, an accurate conclusion requires a number of methods over time."

Early diagnosis is critical not only for people with the disease, but also their families. Caregivers can become frustrated and angry because the person they love is changing in a way they do not



understand. Once diagnosed, the person can benefit from treatment, and their families can find out about available help, and have time to plan for the future with family members and caregivers. If individuals and families are worried, Hickman adds, they can find out about resources through their local Alzheimer Society.

Jim recommends being persistent to get the answers needed. "It boils down to taking responsibility for your own care," he says. "The earlier you admit to having mental confusion, the better off you'll be. There is no cure for dementia. But the medication today helps keep you functioning at a reasonable level. That's a lot better than going undiagnosed for a long period of time and missing out on some of these opportunities."

The importance of early diagnosis is reaching global heights this fall as Alzheimer's Disease International and its 77 member countries, recognize [World Alzheimer's Day](#) September 21 with the message of *Diagnosing Dementia: See It Sooner*.

The goal is to help people understand that memory loss, confusion and difficulty with day to day tasks are not a normal part of aging and may well be a sign of dementia, and encourage them to seek professional advice earlier.

Become educated about dementia and [know the warning signs](#).

[1] ¹ Howard H. Feldman MD, Claudia Jacova PhD, Alain Robillard MD, Angeles Garcia MD PhD, Tiffany Chow MD, Michael Borrie MB ChB, Hyman M. Schipper MD PhD, Mervin Blair BSc, Andrew Kertesz MD, Howard Chertkow MD. Diagnosis and treatment of dementia: 2. Diagnosis. *CMAJ* 2008/03/25;825-836.