

The fish need their peanut butter

By Sarah Condie

"It's 7:00 a.m. and the fish need their peanut butter."

"How old am I?"

"Which way is Montreal?"

"Am I 152?"

These are the type of phrases one might hear in an Alzheimer's ward. They make no sense to us, but these fragmented thoughts are all that remain of the once vibrant seniors who have dementia. The majority of people with Alzheimer's are over 65, but its impact spans all generations. Imagine visiting a loved one who cannot recall who you are or what you have shared in life. For the thousands of memories you treasure, all have been extinguished from the person's mind.

Alzheimer's is an irreversible, progressive disease of the brain that affects 1 in 11 Canadians 65 and older, and is the most common form of dementia. According to the Alzheimer Society of Canada, by 2038 there'll be over one million diagnosed cases in Canada. This figure doesn't reflect the total number of people who will be directly impacted. Families and caregivers are also on the journey of devastation as this insidious disease slowly steals the minds and the essence of those stricken with the disease.

How to best describe this disease? Think of your brain as a computer. Your whole life is written on the hard drive. Alzheimer's essentially wipes your hard drive clean, leaving nothing but empty space. Over the 10-year course of the disease, it is as if the backspace and delete button are constantly pressed. Initially you are aware of this technical glitch, but there is no undo button.

In the beginning stages, people may misplace objects, forget the names of new people and experience difficulty with planning and organization. This sounds like a lot of middle school students! But over time people with Alzheimer's become confused about where they are or what day it is. As the disease progresses further, they may experience a disruption in their circadian rhythm. They sleep during the day and become restless at night -- often wandering and becoming lost. This phenomenon is referred to as sundowning. Suspicious and paranoid thoughts intrude. The person may begin to believe their caregiver is an imposter. In the final stages, individuals lose the ability to speak and eventually, to control movement. Swallowing becomes impaired. Death is imminent.



Caring for a loved one with dementia is a costly affair. Frequently, families endeavour to care for relatives with Alzheimer's in their own homes. Primary caregivers are often seniors themselves and may suffer from other age-related conditions. With too few hours of nursing care, families become stressed under the burden of the constant surveillance required by the person with dementia. Coping with agitation, suspicion and paranoia further challenge the caregiver. The financially fortunate can afford care giving homes dedicated to Alzheimer's. These homes are able to provide compassionate care in a safe environment. Their extensive experience with dementia enables them to preserve the individual's dignity and quality of life despite the ravages of the disease. Families may also find support through the care giving facility. Unfortunately, far too few families have the financial resources to afford this level of care.

As Canada's population ages, the number of people with dementia will grow exponentially. In the year 2038, most of us will be in our mid-thirties. Our parents or grandparents will be of an age where Alzheimer's is a risk. By 2038, we will be the generation responsible for providing care at a cost of \$153 billion dollars each year. Collectively, during this same period, we will spend 756 million hours caring for someone with dementia. Funding for Alzheimer's research needs to increase before this disease becomes an encumbrance on the entire Canadian economy.

In the time it takes you to read this, one more Canadian will be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Every five minutes, one more family begins grieving as they watch their loved one being robbed of their unique gifts and precious memories. One more legacy is left in the hands of another generation. What are we waiting for? It's time to act now.

Sarah Condie is a 12-year-old grade seven student in the gifted program at Westwood Middle School in Toronto. She recently submitted a speech to the Alzheimer Society of Canada that she had written as part of a speech-writing contest. Sarah was inspired to write about Alzheimer's -- a disease that snatched the life of her beloved great-grandfather, William Butler Gregg. Researching the topic, Sarah drew on the fond times on his farm, swimming, learning to ride a bike and catching frogs, and spent a day interviewing the staff at the Sunrise Seniors Centre in Richmond Hill where Bill died shortly after his 96th birthday in 2010. Sarah's speech is a loving tribute to her great-grandfather and is a stark reminder that Alzheimer's disease affects not only one person but entire families.