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Faith & Family

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Living with Alzheimer's

From public disclosures by the late President Ronald Reagan to a new facility at St. Ann's Home in Rochester, Dr. Alois Alzheimer would have been pleased by increased attention on the disease bearing his name.

Such attention comes none too soon, based on projections for a dramatic increase in cases of Alzheimer's — a progressive disease that erodes the brain's memory cells, causing gradual memory loss, personality changes, and diminished ability to comprehend and speak.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, an estimated 4.5 million Americans are afflicted with the disease. That figure stands at least to triple in the next 40 years, due to the aging of baby boomers, coupled with increases in life expectancy. The Alzheimer's Association warns that the disease could severely impact health-care funding if a cure is not found.

However, positive steps are being taken in both research and care of Alzheimer's patients. One example is a Special Care Unit that opened in 2001 on the first floor of Rochester's St. Ann's Home. The 36-bed unit is tailored to people with mid- and late-stage dementia — mostly Alzheimer's patients. Among the floor's features are a small waterfall; plants; laundry and kitchen areas; small office; "baby room" with stuffed animals and bassinet; group meals; specialized staff; and soft music playing throughout the floor with no intercom and limited television usage.

Dean Anne Brown, the unit's nurse manager, said the open-spaced facility suits the wandering tendencies, confusion and need for familiar objects, routines and socialization typical of Alzheimer's



Kenny Prince, who has lived since January on the Special Care Unit for Alzheimer's patients at Rochester's St. Ann's Home, gets ready to leave for one of his morning walks June 8. Photos of loved ones hang outside patients' doors to help them remember which rooms are theirs.

patients.

"They're having enough trouble hanging on to what they do; they can't be distracted by anything else," Brown said.

Kenny Prince, 81, a jovial man with Alzheimer's, has resided at the Special Care Unit since January. Prince said he likes to watch sports and old movies on TV — often accompanied by the unit's resident cat, Charlie — and go for walks. Baseball is his favorite sport next to hockey and basketball, a point he made several times during a 10-minute visit. He told detailed stories about his Army days, but haltingly recited his four children's names and estimated that he has "four to six" grandchildren (he has five).

"They're very nice here," he said of the St. Ann's staff, quipping, "I told them 'You'd

better treat me nice, because I'm a Prince.'"

IN THE PUBLIC EYE

The St. Ann's unit reflects heightened awareness that is relatively recent, considering that Dr. Alzheimer, who died in 1915, made his breakthrough discoveries in the early 20th century. The disease was once deemed rare, but is now regarded as the most common form of dementia among senior citizens.

Alzheimer, a German physician, based his conclusions on a 1906 examination of brain tissue from a woman who had died of mental illness. Chief in his discovery were clumps (now known as amyloid plaques) and bundles of fibers (now known as neurofibrillary tangles). Since then, scientists have found that these buildups force the loss of nerve



cells and the blocking of messages between them.

Progression of Alzheimer's can take place over a period of three of 20 years. Its earliest stage is marked by mild confusion, memory loss and irritability. In the next stage these traits intensify, and the patient may also become apathetic and get lost in familiar places. Patients in late stages may lose their voices, not recognize family or close friends, and become bedridden.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, 10 percent of the population will develop Alzheimer's by age 65; that number rises to nearly 50 percent by age 85. Approximately 100,000 deaths per year are linked directly to Alzheimer's. Although a patient can live

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