

ALZHEIMER'S

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with Alzheimer's for several years, the loss of brain function "will take your life eventually if you don't die from something else first," said Teresa Stewart, executive director of the Alzheimer's Association's Rochester chapter.

Both Stewart and Brown give major credit to President Reagan, who died June 5, for his efforts at awareness-raising. In 1983, while still in office, he designated November as National Alzheimer's Disease Month. In November 1994, President Reagan announced in an open letter to the public that he had recently been diagnosed with the disease, stating that he and his wife, Nancy, "hope this might promote greater awareness of this condition. Perhaps it will encourage a clearer understanding of the individuals and families who are affected by it."

"When someone that revered makes a public statement — that boosted awareness tremendously," Stewart said, adding that the Reagans "have done a world of good for our cause."

"Being such a communicator, he did a lot to advance the cause," Brown agreed. Before that, she said, "People were ashamed. And it's nothing to be ashamed of."

Yet Stewart observed that full acceptance and understanding of Alzheimer's has not yet occurred. "It is absolutely not a normal part of aging; it is a disease of the brain," she said. "(But) we want to just brush it off as senility, hardening of the arteries."



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Alzheimer's patient Kenny Prince pets Charlie the cat at Rochester's St. Ann's Home.

"We've always kind of discriminated against people with mental disabilities," Brown added, noting that Alzheimer's patients don't fit the American ideal "that you pull yourself up by the bootstraps, that you can achieve anything." She said people's aversion to addressing the disease might also be because "I don't think we want to face death. We don't even want to entertain the possibility that we might get Alzheimer's or get dementia."

PROGRESS

According to Stewart, doctors can now make diagnoses "with about 90-95 percent accuracy" that somebody is living with Alzheimer's through accessing medical histories; mental examinations; interviews with family members; magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs); and blood work. In addition, 95 percent of knowledge about the disease has been acquired in the past 15 years, leading to the development of medications by which "we can slow the disease

down and improve our quality of life," Stewart said.

To slow progress of Alzheimer's — and possibly even prevent it — the Alzheimer's Association suggests monitoring one's cholesterol, blood pressure and sugar, and body weight. Other keys to slowing or preventing Alzheimer's are exercise, along with performing such mental activities as crossword puzzles, playing cards, reading and conversing with others. Brown noted that these tips are important because — unlike residents of the floor she supervises — most Alzheimer's patients live at home and do not have the resources available on her Special Care Unit.

Progress is also reflected in the Alzheimer's Association's growth nationwide. Begun in 1980, the organization (which can be accessed on the Web at www.alz.org) now has 81 chapters. The Rochester chapter covers nine counties in the Rochester Diocese — Monroe, Livingston, Steuben, Yates, Ontario, Wayne, Seneca, Chemung and Schuyler. The diocese's other three counties — Tompkins, Tioga and Cayuga — are in the Syracuse chapter.

The Alzheimer's Association regularly runs awareness meetings as well as support groups for caregivers of Alzheimer's patients. Brown noted that St. Ann's Community recently began a monthly Alzheimer's support group as well. Also on the local level, Nazareth College hosted a June 3 Alzheimer's symposium, during which experts addressed memory functions and the benefits of physical activity, socialization, music and dance for Alzheimer's patients.

Stewart said support groups reflect increased attention to the struggles faced by loved ones of Alzheimer's patients. An April 28 teleconference "Living With Grief: Alzheimer's Disease," sponsored by the Hospice Foundation of America, explored the grief experienced by patients and family members through the disease's progression. The conference was viewed by more than 2,000 organizations nationwide.

Another important step is The Nun Study, begun in 1986 by Dr. David Snowdon. The project involved several hundred School Sis-

WARNING SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

According to the Alzheimer's Association, these are 10 warning signs that indicate common symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Anybody displaying several of these signs should get a complete physical evaluation.

- Memory loss that affects job skills
- Difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Problems with language
- Disorientation to time and place
- Poor or decreased judgment
- Problems with abstract thinking
- Misplacing things
- Changes in mood or behavior
- Changes in personality
- Loss of initiative

ters of Notre Dame who donated their brains for Alzheimer's research after they died. The nuns also allowed their personal medical histories to be accessed and took part in several mental and physical tests while alive.

Despite all these developments, Stewart noted that only four or five drugs currently are on the market for Alzheimer's patients whereas "there are hundreds for cancer." She said that the Alzheimer's Association is asking Congress to increase federal funding from \$700 million to \$1 billion annually in hopes of quicker progress toward a cure for Alzheimer's.

This is vital based on statistics provided by the Alzheimer's Association: Medicare costs for beneficiaries with Alzheimer's are expected to rise from \$31.9 billion in 2000 to \$49.3 billion in 2010 — an increase of 54.5 percent over a 10-year period. Medicaid expenditures on nursing facilities for Alzheimer's patients will increase to from \$18.2 billion to \$33 billion over that time frame — an 80 percent jump. These trends would continue to accelerate in subsequent decades, Stewart said.

Without a cure, she remarked, "Alzheimer's will cripple our Medicaid and Medicare systems. There's no doubt about it."



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