Alzheimer’s Research At Washington University

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Do you have questions about Alzheimer's disease? Are you experiencing memory loss, misplacing things, having difficulty performing familiar tasks, problems with language, disorientation to time and place, poor or decreased judgment, problems with abstract thinking, changes in mood or behavior, changes in personality, loss of initiative? Are you aware that these are some of the warning signs of Alzheimer's disease?

Although Alzheimer's disease is the #1 cause of memory loss in older adults, health professionals and family members alike often overlook this disease. Public awareness of Alzheimer's disease has grown recently and has led to increased concern and worry. It has been estimated that of the over 4 million Americans with Alzheimer's disease, only half have been formally evaluated and treated. Providing a correct diagnosis allows individuals to be treated as soon as possible.

Are you aware that Alzheimer's disease affects only about 5% of all individuals over the age of 65 and that serious memory loss is not part of normal aging, but rather the exception? There are many other possible causes for memory loss in older adults, some of which are reversible. Occasional forgetfulness does not signal illness, particularly if it does not interfere with a person's everyday activities. A thorough investigation of worrisome symptoms is appropriate so that a correct diagnosis can be made.

Dr. James Galvin, Education Core and Community Outreach Director of the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC) at the Washington University School of Medicine, shared the above information in his presentation to members of the St. Louis City NAACP. ADRC is actively involved in providing education about Alzheimer's disease and related disorders for students, health professionals and the lay public. Education initiatives are coordinated using all components and faculty of the Center.

In the 1970s, clinicians and investigators at Washington University formed a dementia research team and eventually obtained funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1979, inaugurating the Memory & Aging Project (MAP). The Memory & Aging Project evolved into two major grants that have been continuously funded by the National Institute on Aging of the NIH: the program project, Healthy Aging and Senile Dementia, awarded first in 1984, and the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, awarded in 1985.

The ADRC is one of 30 federally designated Alzheimer's disease Centers that foster innovative research on Alzheimer's disease. The ADRC studies volunteer participants, including those who are aging normally as well as those with dementia, and their families, and their dedication and commitment have been major reasons for the program's success. Other major factors in the ADRC's success are the extraordinary talent and productivity of its investigators and staff.

"The ADRC and its approach to studying dementia have been recognized for very careful characterization of individuals, even those at the very earliest symptomatic stages of the illness," said Dr. John Morris, Friedman Distinguished Professor of Neurology and ADRC Director. "A great deal of data has been obtained as well on a remarkable group of healthy elderly people. We have learned a tremendous amount about healthy aging and dementia disease and have been able to challenge the community's assumption that mental abilities inevitably decline with age."

Despite advances, Alzheimer's disease remains both under diagnosed and under treated by many practicing physicians, according to Morris. The ADRC has recently initiated a major study to identify methods that detect Alzheimer's brain changes that may begin years or even decades before any clinical symptoms appear.

The Education Core of ADRC conducts the oldest continuing weekly seminar series on the Washington University School of Medicine campus and serves as a primary hub for information transfer in support of ongoing research and clinical enterprises. The Education Core coordinates educational offerings for all stakeholders, research participants and their family members, to medical students first learning about Alzheimer's disease, to residents and fellows rotating through the Center, to faculty and staff of the University, to professionals in the community and rotating scholars.

The Education Core also plays a critical bridging role linking the ADRC to the wider community and other organizations, such as the Alzheimer's Association, that serves the needs of persons with dementia and their families. With the advice and support of its African-American Advisory Board, the ADRC has also teamed with the St. Louis Rams Football Team, the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, the Mound City Medial Forum, the Monsanto Family YMCA and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, among other prominent organizations.

The goal of the Education Core is to raise the awareness of risks and impact of Alzheimer's disease, increase participation in clinical research and actively work towards the day when Alzheimer's disease becomes both a preventable and a curable illness.

To learn how you and/or your organization can benefit from programs and educational services provided by the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at the Washington University School of Medicine, call 286-2683.

Nominate a Doer: To keep readers informed on who's who in the community, Shirley A. Brown's column will highlight a community "Doer." A "Doer" is an individual or organization committed to making St. Louis a better place to live and work. Readers are invited to send recommendations to Ms. Brown at 2662 S. St. Louis Argus or to S.Brown601@aol.com.