

Dementia patients getting younger

A disease thought to affect only the elderly, dementia increasingly afflicts those aged below 65

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BENJAMIN WAS A LOVING HUSBAND AND A DEVOTED FAMILY MAN, but a couple of years ago, his wife Annie noticed that his behaviour had started to change. The 59-year-old would misplace small items around the house and accuse Annie of stealing them. Her attempts to reason with him often resulted in a torrent of verbal abuse.

The drastic change in his temperament had a dramatic impact on their lives. Annie's father, who used to be very close to Benjamin, hardly talks to him; and during a dinner with Annie's family, Benjamin accused her of behaving inappropriately when she hugged her brother-in-law.

The once loving husband had morphed into an argumentative, suspicious and occasionally violent man.

About a year ago, Benjamin went to see Dr Nagaendran Kandiah, Consultant, Department of Neurology, National Neuroscience Institute (NNI).

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DR NAGAENDRAN KANDIAH, CONSULTANT, DEPARTMENT OF NEUROLOGY, NATIONAL NEUROSCIENCE INSTITUTE

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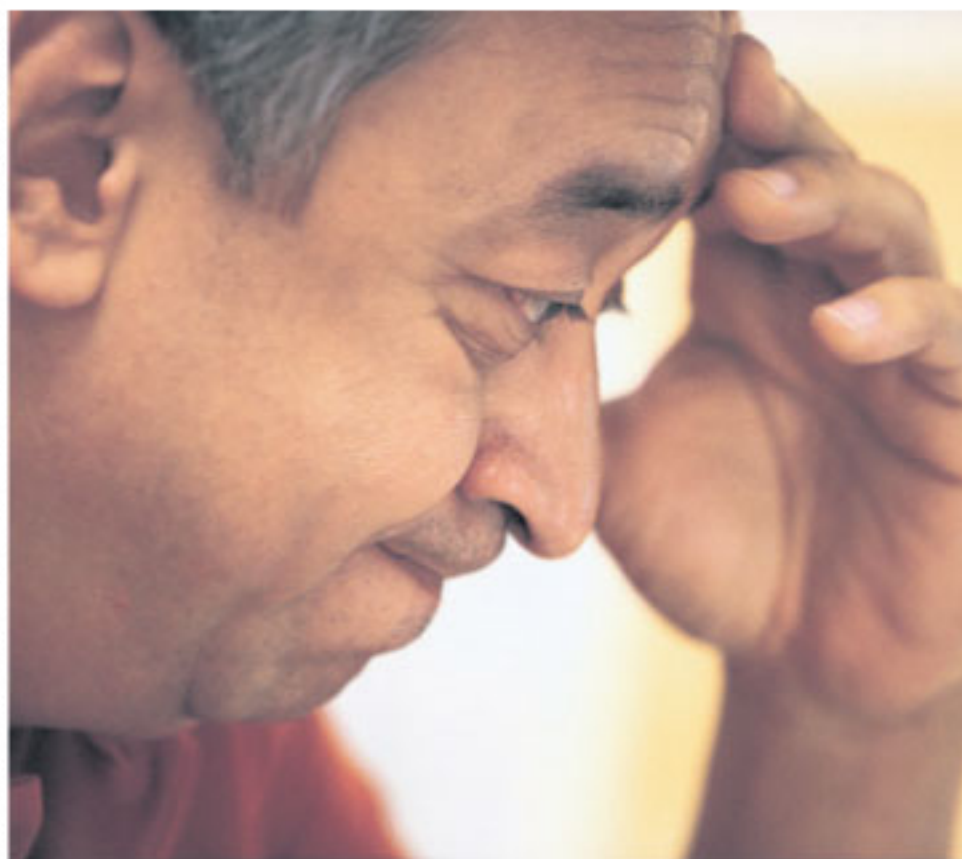
After a comprehensive neurological and cognitive evaluation along with a brain scan, Benjamin was diagnosed with mild Alzheimer's Disease, a form of dementia (see sidebar).

Young onset of dementia

Dementia refers to a group of symptoms affecting memory and other intellectual abilities severely enough to interfere with daily occupational and social functioning, according to NNI.

In 2005, the number of people diagnosed with dementia in Singapore was 25,000. This figure is expected to increase to 53,000 by 2020, according to Dr Nagaendran.

Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI), an early symptom of dementia, is even more prevalent and can begin in the 50-



While medication is able to slow the progress of dementia, love and support also play a big role in keeping symptoms under control.

to 60-year-old age group. Data from NNI showed that 49.5 per cent of the patients attending its dementia clinic between July 2008 to April 2009 were younger than 65 years of age.

“The burden of illness in those younger than 65 years of age is different, both in terms of the cognitive domains involved and the subsequent effects on the patient, caregiver and family,” said Dr Nagaendran. “Dementia affecting someone in their 50s or 60s has a profound effect on employment, finances and family.”

“Patients with early onset of dementia are more likely to have difficulties with language, judgment and behaviour as opposed to memory difficulties in conventional dementia,” said Dr Nagaendran.

Behavioural changes include loss of inhibition and depression; language difficulties include difficulty in finding words, use of wrong words or loss of meaning of words.

Patients may also experience problems with executive functions including judgment errors, difficulty with planning and sequencing, and associated motor problems such as gait difficulty and the inability to coordinate their limbs.

Managing the disease

Dementia is a neuro-degenerative disease that leads to a progressive decline in memory, language and executive functions. “Early diagnosis and intervention is key to managing early onset of dementia because as the disease progresses, the patient will have difficulties at home, at work and even at social functions,” said Dr Nagaendran.

Current treatments involve the use of drugs to slow the progression of the disease and to maintain functional capability. Caregiver support and counselling are also extremely important for the patient.

For patients like Benjamin, his symptoms are kept under control with medication and most importantly, love and support from his wife and family. Annie stands by him through his good and bad days, helping him with mental exercises to keep his mind active. The couple bond over word puzzles and mental arithmetic to help delay the progression of his condition.

“Mental stimulation improves the interneuronal connections in the brain and delays the progression of dementia,” said Dr Nagaendran. He added that future treatments, currently in advanced stages of research, include compounds that halt pathological changes in the brain.

Is Alzheimer's Disease the same as dementia?

Alzheimer's Disease is the most common form of dementia. It accounts for 30 to 40 per cent of diagnoses made in people below the age of 65. This figure rises to 60 to 70 per cent of all dementia diagnoses in people aged above 65.

Risk factors for Alzheimer's include advancing age, low education, genetic inheritance, environmental factors and diet. The disease is more common in females aged 65 and above.

In the early stages of Alzheimer's, patients may experience progressive memory loss and problems finding the right words or directions. In the intermediate to late stages, they may also become confused, experience mood swings and become withdrawn. As this is a progressive disease, more parts of the brain are damaged over time and symptoms become more severe. Sufferers will need more support from loved ones and caregivers and will eventually need help with their daily activities.



SGH awarded for business continuity management

Singapore General Hospital (SGH) recently received a dual Business Continuity Management certification complying with Singapore and British standards.

Hospital staff put in months of preparation leading up to a challenging three-day onsite audit.

The reward was the prestigious certification which recognises the hospital's

success in ensuring a high level of patient care even when faced with serious disruptions such as a fire outbreak.

In July 2004, SGH began Business Continuity Planning to ensure that the hospital is able to respond to major incidents and disruptions without compromising the critical care given to patients.