

## SPOTTING DEMENTIA

Common warning signs of dementia include:

- Memory loss affecting daily function. People with dementia forget things more often and don't remember them later. They may ask questions repeatedly, forgetting you've answered them;

- Difficulty performing familiar tasks. They may be unable to do things that used to be second nature, such as preparing a meal;

- Problems with language. Forgetting simple words or substituting with inappropriate terms;

- Time and place disorientation. Victims of dementia can become lost on their own street or think they're living in another time period;

- Poor or decreased judgment. This can range from wearing seasonally inappropriate clothing or worse, such as neglecting oneself or treatment for an infection or other illness;

- Problems with abstract thinking. Forgetting how to use numbers or how to make a shopping list are common problems.

- Misplacing items. People with dementia may place items in severely inappropriate places. For example, they'll place an iron in the freezer and be incapable of finding it later;

- Dramatic mood changes. People with dementia are subject to rapid emotional swings for no apparent reasons;

- Personality changes. Suspect a potential problem if a loved one demonstrates extreme confusion or becomes fearful, suspicious or withdrawn; and

- Loss of initiative. Victims become passive and refuse to see people or visit places.

# Early detection helps control dementia

BY CHRIS TRABER  
Staff Writer

It can begin with memory loss, changes in mood and behaviour, poor judgment and reasoning. Dementia usually attacks the elderly, leading to a gradual loss of independence.

Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia, becomes the disease of indignity.

Nadene Lebofsky knows only too well.

Her mother, Ester, suffered with Alzheimer's for eight years until she died last year.

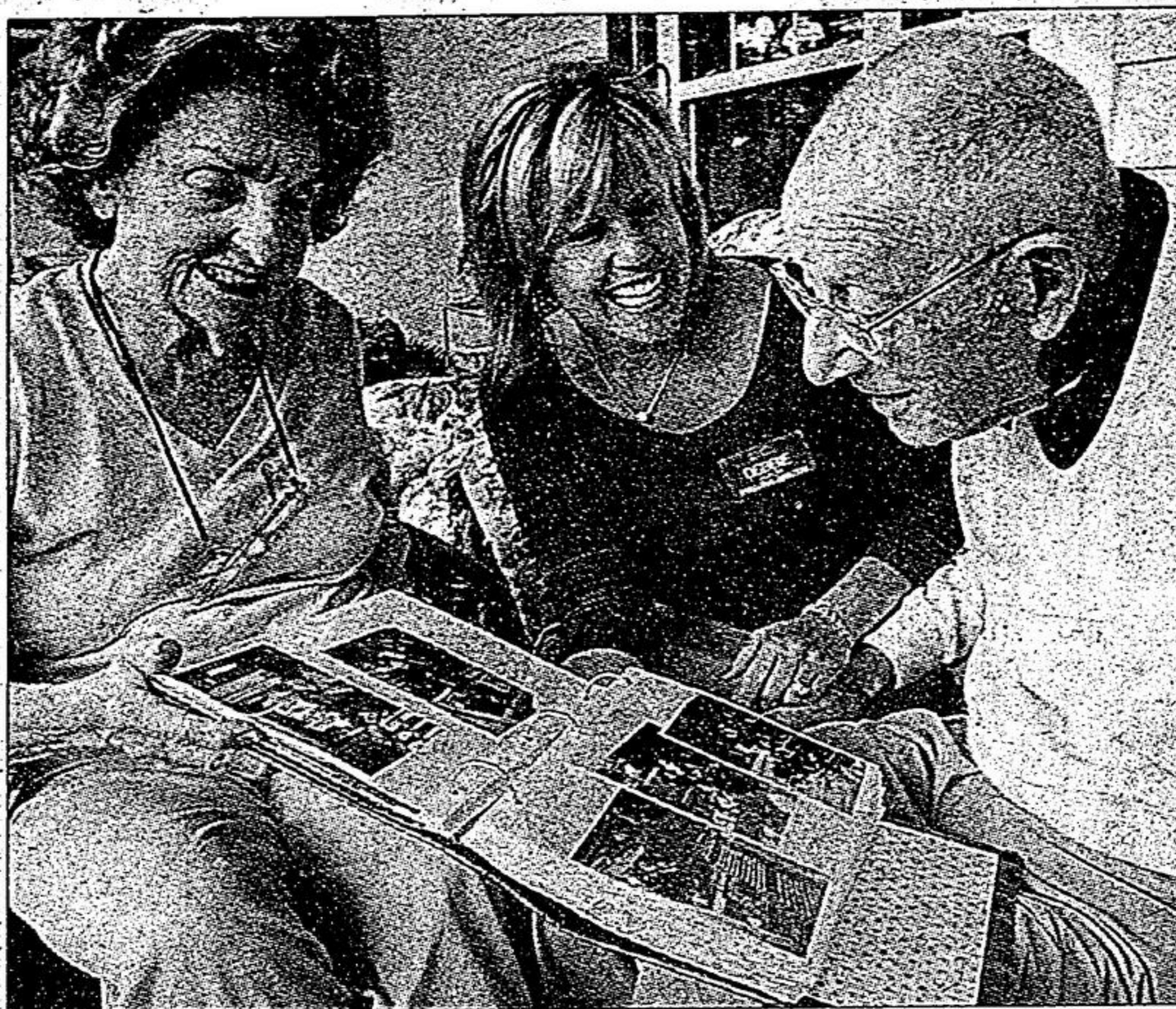
"There comes that day when you walk in and they don't recognize you anymore," said the Thornhill caregiver. "You see that vacant look in their eyes. The worst is when they don't call your name anymore."

"It's the most painful experience and it takes every ounce of your strength. I felt cheated. My mom was there in body, but not in mind. She had become a different person."

With an aging population, more Canadians than ever are being diagnosed with Alzheimer's and other forms of incurable dementia.

Early intervention, beginning with a recognition of the onset warning signs, is crucial to the patient's well-being and quality of life, say York Region experts.

Because of the patient's deteriorating mental abilities, the most difficult initial stage is making him or her realize what's happening, said Unionville family physician Rafik



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Bernice Henry (left) and Colin Prescott, both residents of Sunrise Living of Unionville, keep their memories sharp by looking through photo albums with executive director Debbie Acadio.

Bechbache.

"It's usually the family member or loved one who comes in and says mom is leaving the stove on or is forgetting things," Dr. Bechbache said.

If the dementia is diagnosed and treated early, medications can slow the progression of the disease.

An estimated 364,000 Canadians have Alzheimer's or related demen-

tia. A slight majority are female. The vast majority—97 per cent male, 89 per cent female—are over age 65.

Vigilance by family members and friends is crucial to detect tell-tale signs among this group.

If dementia is suspected, the doctor will conduct tests, including a mental status exam, to determine the cause, extent and type, Dr. Bechbache said.

Several recently approved drugs, including Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl, can treat mild to moderate cases of Alzheimer's. Prescribed medications for Alzheimer's-type dementia alone increased 413 per cent between 1998 and 2002.

Once diagnosed and under a treatment regime, the patient and family have several options.

To care for the patient in the home requires a relative or other person to provide emotional support as well as physical care and supervision. If a patient can't be tended full time but wishes to stay at home, services are available.

Thornhill-based Qualicare Inc. has registered nurses to co-ordinate whatever is needed to make the patient comfortable at home.

"We focus on preventing further problems and keeping people out of hospitals where symptoms of dementia clearly worsen due to change of environment and routine," executive director Andrea Nathanson said.

Most of Ontario's long-term care and retirement residences cater to the special needs of those with dementia.

"Ours is a non-institutional environment that's very home-like," said Sunrise of Unionville executive director Debbie Acadio. "On arrival, an assessment is done on top of the medical report. A profile is also completed to help meet not only their physical requirements, but their social and emotional needs as well."

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