

Outings are break for patients, caregivers

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suggests cases of the disease will more than double in Canada to 1.25 million within 30 years as baby boomers age.

"A lot of time it just gets dismissed as it's just a senior's moment," said Lynn Conforti, manager of fund development for the Alzheimer Society of York Region.

About 15 per cent of people with Alzheimer's are actually under the age of 65, according to Ms Conforti.

"Dementia is not a part of the normal aging process, it's a myth," she said.

For the past eight years, Stouffville's Skip Hughes has watched the disease slowly take hold of his once gregarious and independent mother.

'NOT NORMAL AGING'

"It's a nasty, nasty disease," he said. "It's a slippery slope and once you get on it, it's a quick ride."

Earlier this year, after 30 years with IBM, Mr. Hughes retired and moved his mother from her home in Scarborough to his family home in Stouffville so he could care for her.

"It's stressful for the entire family, including the dog because they sense when things get off the rails," he said.

To help alleviate some of the stress, Mr. Hughes turned to the Alzheimer's Society of York Region, which helped

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Stouffville's Skip Hughes,
son of an Alzheimer's patient

him gain a better understanding of the disease.

"They helped me understand that it's not always my mom as I remember her," he said. "It's a practice in patience."

Last month, Mr. Hughes was able to move his mother into a more suitable location, Bloomington Cove, on the Ninth Line, as well as enroll her into the twice weekly Alzheimer Society of York Region's D.A.Y. (day care for Alzheimer's in York) centre program at Parkview Village.

The program, which is for advanced Alzheimer patients, provides them a safe and structured environment where the focus is not only on having fun, but participating in group activities that help the person re-stimulate their cognitive abilities.

Social interaction with people outside of the family as well as physical exercise and music therapy also take place.

All participants are also fed a healthy diet because quite often, according to

Ms Conforti, people with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia forget to eat and poor nutrition affects the brain's ability to function at its highest level.

The program also does not allow the caregiver to participate.

"It provides the caregiver respite and an opportunity for those looking after someone with Alzheimer's to get a bit of a break," Ms Conforti said.

The separation is also beneficial to the patient.

"The behaviour of the person with Alzheimer's or dementia can change if the caregiver is around — they may not participate," she said.

The Parkview Village location is the third of its kind for the society, which has D.A.Y. programs in Newmarket and Thornhill.

STOUFFVILLE CENTRE OPENING

"(Parkview staff) had identified the need for a cognitive day program," Ms Conforti said. "If you build it, they will come."

The program runs on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and the fee is geared to income.

"It's a good outing for them," Mr. Hughes said. "There's a lot less anxiety. She's tired at night. She's had an outing and feels better about herself."

The centre is holding a grand opening on Jan. 12 from 2 to 4 p.m. at Parkview Village.

WARNING SIGNS OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

1. Memory loss that affects day-to-day abilities.
2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks such as meal preparation.
3. Problems with language. For example, he or she may forget words or substitute words that make sentences hard to understand.
4. Disorientation in time and space. The result can be getting lost on their own street.
5. Poor or decreased judgment. For example, he or she may wear heavy clothing on a hot day.
6. Problems with abstract thinking i.e. they do not understand what numbers are and how they are used.
7. Misplace things.
8. The person may suffer extreme mood swings and go from calm to tears to anger for no apparent reason.
9. Personality changes and they become confused, suspicious or withdrawn.
10. Loss of initiative. The person becomes very passive and requires cues and prompts to become involved.

How to maintain or improve brain health

1. Challenge your brain by reading and doing crossword puzzles.
2. Be socially active.
3. Choose a healthy lifestyle that includes a well balanced diet, minimal stress, no smoking or excessive alcohol consumption.
4. Protect your head while playing contact sports — at every age. Brain injuries are risk factors for later development of Alzheimer's disease.

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