



## Many doctors derelict in duties with Alzheimer's patients and caregivers

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on April 05, 2015 at 12:51 PM, updated April 05, 2015 at 12:52 PM



More than 45 percent of people diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease are not told of the diagnosis by their doctor, nor are their caregivers.

Let me stop a second and let you to try wrap your head around that one.

Nearly half of the people who are diagnosed with the sixth-most deadly disease in the United States aren't told they have Alzheimer's or a dementia.

That, according to the 2015 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures report, released recently in conjunction with the Alzheimer's Association annual advocates' meeting in Washington.

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#### • About the writer

Mark McCarter began working with The Huntsville Times in 1998 and writes columns on local news for the Alabama Media Group. He frequently writes on Alzheimer's disease and dementia and the journey his family has faced with that disease. Let us know what you think by leaving a comment below or reach Mark at [mmccarter@al.com](mailto:mmccarter@al.com).

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By contrast, says the report, 90 percent of those diagnosed with the four major types of cancer are informed of the prognosis.

We're not talking a misdiagnosis here.

We're talking malpractice at the worst, incompetence and indifference at the least.

"Unfortunately, I am not surprised by these numbers," said Brandi Medina, director of programs and education for the Alzheimer's Association in Huntsville. "I have people call us at the Alzheimer's Association every day with concerns about themselves and loved ones but with no diagnosis."

Ironically, she says some patients have been prescribed drugs that treat the symptoms of dementia, but the doctors don't give tell them why.

"Those diagnosed with Alzheimer's have a great need for information on the disease, what to expect and what resources are available," Medina said. "It is imperative patients are receiving this education and support from their physicians."

To that end, as part of an outreach program to health care providers, the local association office is sponsoring a physicians conference on May 15 from 2 p.m. until 4:30 at Hampton Cove Golf Course. A golf tournament will held that morning prior to the conference and there is no charge for the tournament or program for qualified health care professionals.

Dr. Keith Fargo, the director of science operations and outreach for the national Alzheimer's Association, and Dr. Bob Zylstra, the director of behavioral medicine at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Chattanooga, will be the keynote speakers.

It's an important awareness issue for health care professionals in this state. Some 12 percent of seniors in Alabama have a form of dementia. There are 87,000 Alabamians living with the disease; with life expectancies rising, that number is expected to be 110,000 by 2025 unless treatment is discovered.

It's not easy news to share, and there "are various reasons," acknowledged Jim Ward, the CEO of the Mid South chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

It's partly because of the stigma and discomfort some people still have with mental health issues compared with other health issues. And because there is not a cure - scientists continue to make inroads for treatment and toward a cure but - there is the sense of pronouncing a death sentence to the patient and their family.

My late mother died more than three years ago after suffering from Alzheimer's.

She never received a diagnosis from her long-time personal care physician, though I'm not sure he could tell athlete's foot from appendicitis, much less Alzheimer's. He simply ordered his nurse practitioner to call me a couple of times to say, "Your mom is slipping a little bit."

After consultation with the Alzheimer's Association, we were fortunate to find a capable specialist who confirmed our fears.

Through our family's journey with her illness, I've written frequently about the disease. And through that -- in the interest of full disclosure -- I was honored to be asked to join the Mid South Chapter board of directors.

We were told of the 45-percent stat at a meeting last Saturday. And for whatever the reasons might be for the lack of full disclosure, I agree with what Ward told us.

"It's an insulting thing."

It's 55 percent who are negligent - and that's 100 percent wrong.

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