

DEMENTIA - WHO BEARS THE PAIN?

Last month I wrote about Dementia as the illness that threatens to dominate (and may even overwhelm) the NHS and the Social services. This month I am looking at it from the carer's viewpoint.

Most of us will have some experience of a relative, friend or neighbour who has suffered from the symptoms of Dementia. It is a frightening illness, which progressively attacks our mental abilities and makes us dependent upon carers for nearly all of our daily needs. It causes severe loss of short-term memory leading to disorientation and helpless wandering. Major behaviour and personality changes often cause the person's closest relatives to say "I just don't know them anymore". Because the symptoms tend to develop slowly and relentlessly someone with the condition and those closest to them often don't realise what is happening until the symptoms are well established. It is usually the family and friends who notice that something is wrong, and it is not unusual for the person to never accept that they are suffering from dementia.

But the pain of Dementia is not just born by the person. For most carers (and these are usually close relatives) the inevitable reduction in their loved one's faculties is heartbreaking. Carers can become increasingly frustrated, depressed, stressed-out and exhausted. Eventually they can no longer cope and the person must be taken into residential care. With that step comes a feeling of guilt - guilt that they had failed to care enough or not worked hard enough. For a family caring for an elderly sufferer of Dementia, the cost is often in strained relationships and limited social life.

This is a situation that is being played out in many homes in our community. It has been estimated that up to 30% of today's population will suffer from Dementia to a lesser or greater degree. Can we help? Yes, I believe we can and I would like to invite you to a meeting at 7.30 pm on Thursday 23rd April at Dove Cottage, St. Mary's Church, Debenham. Drs. Paddy Fielder and John Gumpert together with Sue Jackson (rtd mental health social worker) will lead a discussion to further our understanding of the illness and its impact on carers and the community at large, with the aim of developing support for sufferers and, Especially, their carers.

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