

Diagnosis occurs after pathological exam

LAMP tries to identify disease

by Greg Halinda

William lost his way while returning home from work last night. This was not the first time. Though he has driven the same route for the last 18 years, William finds he is losing his way more frequently as the years go by. Unknown to him or his family, William, age 62, has Alzheimer's disease.

Unless he receives the correct psychological help, William's condition will only get worse. Tragically, today there is no method of detecting Alzheimer's disease in its early stages.

The fictitious account of the Alzheimer victim given above will become relevant to more and more Canadians as they reach golden age. A conservative estimate predicts 15 per cent of Canadians over the age of 65 will develop senile dementia of some degree. One-third of these cases will be severe. One half will be Alzheimer's disease.

Two U of A psychologists are contributing to the fight against Alzheimer's disease. Allen Dobbs and Brendan Rule are conducting LAMP — Lifespan Adult Memory Project, a 5-year project begun last April. Through LAMP, Dobbs and Rule will attempt to identify Alzheimer victims in the early stages of their disease.

Symptoms of Alzheimer's include speech irregularities and a progressive loss of certain types of memory. However, other dementia include these symptoms.

"Currently Alzheimer's disease can only be diagnosed by exclusion"

Since neither a cause nor a cure of Alzheimer's is known, researchers are busy trying to distinguish the disease in its early stages from dementia of other kinds.

"Currently, Alzheimer's disease can only be diagnosed by exclusion," says Dobbs. "Exclusion," he says, "of conditions like depression or brain tumors," which can result in demented behaviour.

"The real diagnosis comes after they die and we take a look at their brain." It is the pathological examination of damaged brain tissue that confirms or denies Alzheimer's disease. Hopefully, if LAMP succeeds, this will change.

Dobbs and Rule are seeking the answers to this question — What differentiates a person with normal mental aging from an Alzheimer victim in the early days of his disease?

LAMP will follow three groups of volunteers derived from a sample of about 550 adults aged 30-99. Included are 50 people diagnosed as having Alzheimer disease, 120 who are at risk to developing the disease, and about 400 others not

fitting these two categories.

The "at risk" group is of special interest. According to Dobbs, this group contains people over 65 years who are showing declines in cognitive ability. Comparing those of the group displaying dementia characteristic of Alzheimer's with those who do not, Dobbs and Rule hope to discover signs warning of the onset of serious dementia.

The volunteers will be tested for several types of cognition — memory, comprehension, spatial orientation, ability to verbalize, categorize, and follow directions, among others. These tests should also help clarify what "normal" mental aging is, a very important yet elusive category against which dementia must be compared.

The ultimate goal of LAMP? Not a cure, but therapy to help the Alzheimer victim survive in society. Damaged memory cannot be revived, but "we can teach the patient to use what they still have more effectively," says Dobbs. The key is getting to the patient before it's too late.

More Dean Bour

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their end of the responsibility and attend, something that is not always done. "Students are invited to the meetings, but they are seldom seen. The staff does not have the time or the resources to hunt them down."

Bour says that because of the small size of FSJ (less than 400 students) student input is needed more than other larger faculties.

Bour also is convinced that the present student apathy is only a phase. "In the 1960s I participated in committees where there was a lot of student activism. This has calmed down in recent years. In those times students were much more socially aware, but now with the bad economic situation they're much more concerned with getting jobs."

"I have always believed that education must be based on a moral philosophy, that it must better the individual, and that with education comes responsibilities. People who get educations are getting a social privilege, and when you get something from a society (like an education) you owe that society something in return. Students should remember this. They have intellectual advantages that others don't have, and they have a responsibility to transfer some of that learning back to society in general."

"There is a moral contract that comes with being a student," says Bour.

"There are no absolutes in education. There are lots of philosophies, and our system of education is based on a certain sense of democratic participation and compromise. But to express one's thoughts doesn't mean imposing them on others or thinking that we have the absolute truth," said Bour. "There is no room in university for intolerance, intellectual terrorism, or inertia."



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