

Remembering to hope

By Tony Pearson

Some years ago, I went home at Christmas to visit my parents. At first, everything seemed normal. Then I found my father trying to do up the zipper on a coat. He looked at me with a rueful expression and said 'I've been trying to do this for almost 15 minutes and I can't remember how the damn thing works.' My heart sank. I knew this was the start of a long slide into the total darkness of full-blown Alzheimer's. Eventually the disease shut down his whole body. He died when his breathing just stopped.

Considering that the disease also claimed my mother, my mother's sister, and my father's sister - in each case, with the end coming in a nursing institution - I get very interested in efforts to fight the illness.

It's easy to think that nothing ever improves. Every year, we have campaigns raising funds for cancer, heart and many other diseases. We wait to hear announcements of a total cure, and get discouraged when we don't hear such news.

But this focus on a total cure often obscures the incremental progress made in so many areas. For example, I was surprised to hear, when covering last year's Relay for Life, that survival rate five years after a diagnosis of cancer is now 60 per cent. A half century ago, it was 25 per cent.

The same story repeats itself with heart disease and stroke. The death rate here has declined by 75 per cent over the last 50 years or so.

Some of the progress is due to new pharmaceuticals and medical treatments. In fact, from time to time a medicine is discovered that virtually eradicates a disease. I am old enough to remember the news that a polio vaccine had been discovered. My parents were terrified of my getting struck by polio, which could result in losing the use of your legs, or even spending all your time in an 'iron lung.' So when the Salk vaccine made it to the schools, they were elated; I was pretty happy myself.

What about Alzheimer's? Ironically, as more and more inroads are made on traditional diseases, enabling people to live longer, the incidence of Alzheimer's and other dementias will increase. Are they an almost inevitable part of what Hamlet called 'the whips and scorns of time'?

There's a lot of research on new drugs; one of these (aducanumab) shows a tremendous amount of promise. But it's just started clinical trials, and won't be on the market for years.

But drugs aren't the only source of hope. Lifestyle plays an important part in fighting illness - just think of what the reduction in smoking has accomplished in reducing cancer and heart disease. So too, you can decrease your chances of dementia by exercising your brain, staying socially active, remaining physically fit and eating right.

Even when the disease hits, its effects can be eased. There's a great short video on a village called Hogewey, near Amsterdam in The Netherlands. At first, it looks like a retirement community, with seniors biking along, shopping, taking in a movie, going to a restaurant.

Then you discover that these seniors are all suffering from dementia. Yet thanks to a group of geriatric nurses, plus service personnel like clerks trained in dealing with Alzheimer's, their quality of life remains high. Considering that the alternative is either ceaseless care by a family member or institutionalization, it's an amazing place.

Mind you, it's not cheap. Running the village costs about \$25 million a year. Even though most of this is paid for by the Dutch government, residents' families still have to pay up to \$7,000 a month (fees are geared to income).

On the other hand, the Alzheimer's Society commissioned a study which shows that care for Canadian dementia sufferers is in excess of \$100 billion a year. Nursing homes aren't cheap either. But one thing's sure: I'd rather have visited my mother at a village like Hogewey than at the dreary nursing home where at the end, she spent 24 hours a day in bed, staring into space, along with so many others in the same condition.

The point of all this? It's that although we may not always be aware of it, progress is constantly being made on all the physical 'slings and arrows' we face. So there is a reason to support medical research and health promotion programs.

In addition however, there's a reason to support the people trying to make us aware of what we can do to prevent disease, or lessen its impact - in ourselves, or with others. Today, the best medicine against Alzheimer's is a supportive community. As the slogan goes, 'no one should have to face Alzheimer's alone.'