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CONVERSATIONS WITH "SILVER DOC"

Issue #5: Dementias Other Than Alzheimer's Disease

A recent column spoke about Alzheimer's disease as the Kleenex® of the dementias, in other words, as the most common specific type of dementia. So what about the Puffs®, Scotties® and other "brands" of dementia?

Actually, more than 70 medical conditions can cause dementia. Potentially reversible dementias, accounting for less than 5% of cases, may be caused by thyroid dysfunction, certain types of vitamin deficiencies or infections, kidney or liver failure, long-standing alcohol abuse, and tumors. These conditions can be detected by specific laboratory tests and brain scans.

Unfortunately, most dementias are not reversible and basically fall into two categories: (1) degenerative dementias, of which the most common is Alzheimer's disease, and (2) vascular dementias. Brain scans help to distinguish between the two types. Definitive diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease ultimately requires biopsy or autopsy to identify the tangles and plaques that lead to brain cell loss and brain shrinkage and cause the disease. Genetic studies may support the diagnosis. Spinal fluid studies are being used in some settings. Newer technologies such as PET and SPECT detect changes in brain cell function that occur before changes can be seen in the matter of the brain. These and other methods remain the subject of intense scientific research.

There are other degenerative dementias besides Alzheimer's disease. The most common are Lewy Body disease and the frontotemporal dementias of which the most common is Pick's disease. Frontotemporal dementias are so named because of the particular part of the brain most affected, namely areas of the front and lower sides. Specific tissue abnormalities, similar to the plaques and tangles of Alzheimer's disease, also characterize Lewy Body and Pick's diseases. Parkinson's disease may also cause dementia in a proportion of patients, especially late in the course of the disease. Huntington's disease, which is passed down in families, involves abnormal body movements along with mental changes. Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is a rare rapidly progressive brain disease that is related to Mad Cow Disease.

Many of the dementias have typical clinical features. Therefore, experienced physicians correctly diagnose Alzheimer's disease more than 85% of the time even without biopsy or autopsy data. Vascular dementia,

caused by multiple small or large brain infarcts (“strokes”), usually occurs in people who either have had a previous stroke or who have risk factors for stroke, e.g., hypertension and high cholesterol. There tend to be a more sudden onset of mental changes, a more variable pattern of deficits, and accompanying symptoms that look more like a typical stroke, such as arm or leg weakness. Frontotemporal dementias, because of the areas of brain most affected, commonly present with behavioral and personality changes, such as withdrawal, lack of insight, inappropriate or disinhibited behavior, and decreased verbal fluency, even before the cognitive changes.

There are advantages to early and correct diagnosis. Medications are now available to slow progression, particularly of Alzheimer’s disease. In addition, medications may be helpful for associated behavioral changes. Early diagnosis enables planning to maximize independence, dignity and safety. The differences between the various types of dementia may seem subtle, but the implications are probably more dramatic than the type of facial tissue we use. Something else to think about the next time we sneeze. *Gesundheit!*

Silver Doc

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