



Readers' Corner

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Memory matters

By GARETH ROWLANDS*

How often have we all gone to an adjoining room intending to fetch an item and, having reached there, forgotten what we went for? Sometimes we can do this more than once. But we all suffer from some form of memory loss for different reasons, sometimes because we are so preoccupied with other things and our minds are already 'overloaded' with things to remember and think about.

It is quite normal to forget in this way but concerns can arise when an individual completely forgets and can't work out, for example, where he or she lives, where different rooms are in the house, what month of the year it is, who a close relative or loved one is or where personal possessions are kept and a combination of these to mention just a few. Such memory loss could well be an indication of signs and symptoms of the onset of Alzheimer's disease, which is the main cause of dementia.

Through dedicated and on-going research, various drugs have been found to

control Alzheimer's disease to some extent. Dementia is a disease and an illness of the brain during which there is a gradual but noticeable deterioration of some of the complex powers of the brain. As the brain's powers deteriorate with the loss of a number of brain cells, the brain ceases to function as well as it should or as well as expected.

This usually results, at first, in the loss of memory, followed by a reduction in language and communication skills along with a general and noticeable loss in the ability to do things. As expected, this affects a person's quality of life.

Most types of dementia progress slowly and those usually affected by dementia are older people. It is rare in people under the age of 60 years. Of course, not everyone will suffer from dementia in old age. It is recognised that most of us become forgetful from time to time and this is quite normal. When a person is diagnosed with dementia, it is vital that the cause is established as far as possible because in some cases the disease is reversible.

The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease and because of this, Alzheimer's is commonly equated with the general term, dementia. However, there are many other causes of dementia. Distinguishing Alzheimer's disease from the other causes of dementia requires the detailed examination of a person's past life history by a medical practitioner to ascertain the person's abilities, followed, more often than not, by examining results obtained from various tests such as the standard set of tests called the 'mini mental state examinations', analysing blood tests, full medical examinations and various brain scans.

The various scans include the CT scan which gives a detailed picture of the brain's structure, the MRI scan used when there are difficulties in diagnosis and the SPECT scan which can show if there are restricted blood flows to any part of the brain.

Apart from Alzheimer's disease, some of the other medical conditions and diseases which cause dementia include Parkinson's disease, Huntington's disease,

Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, Motor neurone disease, Binswanger's disease and HIV. Conditions such as chest or urinary infections, heart problems, stress, anxiety and depression are other known causes.

Conditions that harm blood vessels supplying the brain with blood can cause a type of dementia called vascular or blood vessel dementia. This type of dementia is caused when small blood vessels in the brain become blocked causing the death of certain brain cells dealing with memory. Another type of dementia is called the Lewy Body dementia when small deposits of protein are found in some nerve cells in the brain which interfere with the brain's normal functions and memory recall.

Other types of dementia include Pick's disease and alcohol-related dementia. Brain scans in particular help to distinguish between Alzheimer's disease and the various types of dementia. ■

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