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Guest column

Shedding light on darkness that is Alzheimer's

By MARIA SCHMIDT

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A little more than a century ago, on Nov. 25, 1901, a German neuropsychologist, Dr. Alois Alzheimer, admitted a new patient known as Frau Auguste D. of Frankfurt, Germany, into the city's Hospital for Mental Illness and Epilepsy. The 51-year-old woman had no personal or family history of mental illness, and her symptoms seemed to represent a significant departure from senility. She not only suffered difficulty performing everyday tasks with memory problems, but also had unusual bursts of anger, was unable to remember her entire name, her husband's name or how long she had been in the hospital.

Never having witnessed such an insidious neurological decline accompanied with such profound senility, both the doctor and Auguste D. were helplessly perplexed. Auguste D.'s slowly progressive disease wasn't just an intellectual deficit but an uncommon and unforgiving cluster of psychiatric symptoms that included unpredictable and challenging behavior, auditory hallucinations and paranoia.

Dr. Alzheimer asked her to write her name. She failed several times before she looked up, exasperated, and declared, "I have lost myself" - a fitting description of the degenerative fate that would follow her.

Old journals from the annals written by Dr. Alzheimer noted, "Her gestures showed a complete helplessness. She was disoriented as to time and place. From time to time she would state that she did not understand anything, that she felt confused and totally lost.

"Sometimes she considered the coming of the doctor as an official visit and apologized for not having finished her work, but other times she would start to yell out of the fear that the doctor wanted to operate on her, damage her woman's honor. From time to time she was completely delirious, dragging her blankets and sheets to and fro, calling for her husband and daughter, and seeming to have auditory hallucinations. Often she would scream for hours and hours in a horrible voice."

Three years into her illness, in late 1904, Auguste became bedridden, incontinent and almost completely immobile. A year later, she was

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permanently curled up in a fetal position, with her knees drawn up to her chest, muttering but unable to speak, and requiring assistance to be fed, just like a baby out of the mother's womb.

With the best physicians completely unable to stop her lengthy decay, Auguste's mind finally forgot how to have the heart beat and how to have the lungs inhale air. She died on April 8, 1906, almost reaching her 56th birthday, nearly five years after the start of her mysterious illness.

Dr. Alzheimer continued his research into Frau Auguste D.'s consented autopsy, conducted in one of Europe's most distinguished neurological research settings. With great amazement, he would discover never before seen tacky plaques and cellular tangles covering Auguste D.'s shrunken brain.

Alzheimer later presented a remarkable lecture at a conference in Tuburgen. He described for the first time a form of dementia that subsequently, at the suggestion of his colleagues, became known as Alzheimer's disease. The emancipation of a new diagnosis, named after its dedicated scientist, was launched into the medical lexicon.

This new disease kept silent for almost a century, until our aging population steadily got older, dodging previously catastrophic terminal conditions, therefore becoming more vulnerable.

One hundred years later, modern doctors with much more advanced technologies are no more capable of halting the progression of this devastating disease, which is widely multiplying in our population.

From this history, it is easy to see why our medical and scientific communities have declared November to be National Alzheimer's Month. This is when many celebrate the passion for research about the disease, the incredible diagnostic and treatment advancements now available, and most of all, the courage and inspiration found in those living with and caring for persons with Alzheimer's disease.

On a local note: Members of our health care community will be offering free memory and mood screenings to help identify the presence of early memory and/or mood disorders. Due to recent therapeutic advances, early diagnosis is not only important in controlling behavioral difficulties, but can contribute to delaying its degenerative tendency.

Screenings will be held at Dr. P. Gurnani's psychiatry office, 3787 W Gulf to Lake Highway (State Road 44) in Inverness from 9 a.m. to noon Dec. 1. Registration is necessary to allow adequate personnel and testing tools.

Professional nurses from Ultimate Nursing Care's specialized Dementia and Geriatric Behavioral Team will assist with resources and other instructional tools.

Call 564-0777 to register or for further information.

Maria Schmidt is a registered nurse, holds a bachelor's degree in nursing and is a certified dementia practitioner. She is director of the gero-behavioral program for Ultimate Nursing Care and lives in

Dunnellon. She drew on information from about 15 written sources in preparing this column.

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