

# *Geriatrics Consulting Services of Greensboro, P.A.*

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## CONVERSATIONS WITH "SILVER DOC"

### ***Issue #3: Let's Get Some Clarity About Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia***

As a geriatric medicine physician, I am frequently asked, "What is the difference between Alzheimer's disease and dementia?" My response is that the difference between Alzheimer's disease and dementia is like the difference between Kleenex® and facial tissues. Because two-thirds of dementia in this country is caused by Alzheimer's disease, Alzheimer's disease is the "Kleenex®" of the dementias. We tend to use the terms interchangeably, just as we do Kleenex® and facial tissues.

Dementia is the general name for a disease process that involves a significant decline in mental abilities and behavior. It is chronic, progressive, and usually irreversible. Besides memory impairment, one or more of the following must be present to make the diagnosis of dementia: *aphasia* (problems of language function), *apraxia* (impaired ability to perform motor activities), *agnosia* (inability to recognize or identify objects), or *impaired executive function* (inability to plan, organize and abstract information). In addition, the deficits must be severe enough to cause "significant impairment" of social or occupational functioning. This latter feature is important to distinguish early dementia from normal aging changes because the memory changes of normal aging do *not* have a significant effect on how we function on a day-to-day basis. Memory changes of normal aging in fact involve recall more than memory per se, that is, delays in our ability to recall information, like names. Moreover, normal aging changes generally do not involve other cognitive processes.

Alzheimer's disease, as the most common of the dementias, is a *specific* degenerative brain disease characterized by impaired memory, learning, thinking and judgment. It is due to a loss of cells in the brain and is more common with advancing age. Deficits in recent memory occur very early in the disease process, followed by the development of problems with language, comprehension, visuospatial orientation, and movement. Personality changes such as apathy, irritability, or depression may also occur early in the disease.

As the disease progresses, disorientation increases and there is loss of ability to perform daily living functions, such as managing money, shopping, using a telephone, grooming, dressing, and bathing. Behavioral changes also become more common and may include delusions (false beliefs), hallucinations and agitation. In the latest stages, incontinence and movement disturbances develop, and the ability to speak may be lost entirely. It is important to realize, however, that despite general patterns of presentation

and progression, “not everyone’s body reads the textbooks” and the specific characteristics of an individual’s disease may evolve in a unique manner.

Definitive diagnosis ultimately requires biopsy or autopsy to identify the specific changes in the brain that cause the disease, namely, neurofibrillary tangles and beta-amyloid plaques that lead to brain cell loss. Other methods are the subject of intense scientific research. However, clinical studies have demonstrated that physicians correctly diagnose Alzheimer’s disease more than 85% of the time, based on typical features and the exclusion of other potential causes. The good news is that medications are now available to slow disease progression and help manage behavioral changes. Early diagnosis also enables planning to preserve independence, dignity and safety to the greatest extent possible.

So if you are trying to understand the difference between dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, you are trying to understand the difference between facial tissues and Kleenex®. Because Alzheimer’s disease is so clearly the most common cause of dementia in the elderly, even health professionals commonly use the terms interchangeably, which only contributes to the semantic confusion. Something to think about it the next time you sneeze and reach for a Kleenex®. “Gezundheit!”

Silver Doc

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