

Stop the Fear-Mongering

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Fear-mongering is a hugely effective and cowardly weapon used unconscionably in politics, religion, and healthcare. You can easily come up with your own examples in the first two categories; my concern is how it is used by those who have a vested interest in various health conditions. The greatest need I see related to Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia is public understanding, which comes from knowledge and close contact. Fear-mongering blocks both.

One must ask, who benefits from fear-mongering? Certainly not the people with dementia, and certainly not their caregivers who are stressed enough trying to do "the right thing" without necessarily knowing what that might be. The beneficiaries are:

- The fund-raising organizations looking for contributions ("Help us find a cure," they say, without adding the obvious, "before you're the next victim.")
- The pharmaceutical industry, because they want to sell lots of drugs, even though their effect is limited, and the side effects can be many.
- Other healthcare entities that want to sell tests, evaluation or products, ("Step right up, folks; improve your memory here,") or fill beds and programs.

Not everyone in these groups uses fear-mongering, nor does its use mean that the group or organization using it is failing to do anything worthwhile. I have huge admiration, for example, for the grass roots programs that have long been the heart of so many Alzheimer's chapters. I only object to funding that comes from fear-mongering.

People with dementia have brains that are deteriorating beyond their control, and, yet, in my experience and those of my many colleagues, most manage to cope with remarkable grace. Those who don't or who have momentary lapses tend to do so because they are inappropriately drugged or forced into situations they are too confused, uncomfortable, or frustrated to deal with. (You would object, too, if someone you perceived as a stranger wanted to bathe you!)

My father once complained to me that my mother (who had Alzheimer's disease) used to beat her fists against his chest when he asked her a simple question. The often-asked question was "What day is it?" She never knew, and it didn't matter to anyone but him. She hit him only when she grew tired of his "tests" and no longer had the words to express her anger at having her vulnerability exposed. He had the power to end this rare violence by the simple act of silence – not asking what he knew she didn't know.

My father's lack of understanding was to be feared, not my mother's flailing. If we are going to fear-monger, let's do it against ignorance. Understanding the condition and the functioning of the brain and getting to know the person who is still "there" – *and someone is* – will overcome the fear.

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