The Multi-faceted Challenge of Alzheimer’s Disease

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Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is a major challenge to society, especially given the increased dependence of patients with this disease on their caregivers (either family or healthcare professionals) as the dementia progresses. The progression of a patient’s dependence is not simply due to the number of plaques and tangles, or to an increase in an ever-expanding array of biomarkers. Rather, these patients are affected by concomitant physical illnesses and social circumstances, and the disease’s progression affects their cognition, function and behavior.

This issue of The Canadian Review of Alzheimer’s Disease and Other Dementias reflects the high dimensionality of dementia. It underscores that our repertoire of responses as healthcare providers needs to be very robust.

In their article, Drs. Marie-Pierre Thibodeau and Fadi Massoud review cholinesterase inhibitors (ChEIs) and memantine, drugs that often lessen dependence and aid cognition and behavior. In his article, Dr. Serge Gauthier updates healthcare professionals on the prospects of newer drugs, including disease-modifying drugs whose impact on biomarkers may help guide the interpretation of efficacy.

The article “Non-pharmacologic Therapies: A Different Approach to AD” by Drs. Virginie Gardette, Nicola Coley and Sandrine Andrieu highlights how non-pharmacological approaches can help cognition, behavioral function and social interaction.

Finally, Dr. Peter Lin, a savvy media personality, helps us understand media myths concerning dementia, and the Alzheimer Society’s Scientific Director, Dr. Jack Diamond, calls attention to how music studies in dementia help us understand not just treatment modality, but cognitive function in general.

It was once believed that healthcare providers of dubious competence could at least care for people with dementia, which, it was felt, required no special expertise. As a moment’s reflection makes clear, and as this issue illustrates, the many challenges of dementia show that healthcare providers must be knowledgeable in a large number of areas to meet the many needs of patients affected by these dreaded illnesses.