

Alzheimer's Association Rep Shares Info With Rotary Club



By Sarah Wetzel For the Plain Talk; Nov. 3, 2023

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Leslie Morrow, executive director of the Alzheimer's Association of South Dakota, shared information about the organization during a recent meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club.

The South Dakota chapter of the Alzheimer's Association has an office in Sioux Falls. Despite being staffed by only four people, it covers all 66 counties in the state, providing services and resources at no cost.

"The Alzheimer's Association leads the way to end Alzheimer's and all other dementia — by accelerating global research, driving risk reduction and early detection, and maximizing quality care and support," Morrow said, sharing the Association's mission.

She also shared that they are the largest nonprofit funder of Alzheimer's research in the world behind only the US and Chinese governments.

"We are currently funding a professor here at USD," Morrow said. "He is one who applied for the new to the field portion of the grants that we do. He is looking at a molecule in the brain that traditionally he was manipulating to treat depression and he found that it improved cognition as well. So he applied for a grant."

She said the Association is currently funding 1,000 different projects across the globe.

Morrow shared differences between Alzheimer's and Dementia, two terms usually used interchangeably.

"Dementia is actually an umbrella term for a set of symptoms," she said. "I kind of compare it to if you have the sniffles, that is the symptom you are having but there are a number of reasons you might have the sniffles. Is it allergies, is it a sinus infection, is it a cold? That's what Dementia is. It's a set of symptoms that deal with your cognition, how you carry out your everyday life but there are a number of reasons that would be happening.

Alzheimer's is the most common form of Dementia."

Morrow said there are many types of Dementia and it is possible for someone to have a mix of the types.

She stated that even though Alzheimer's is in the association's name, their official name is "Alzheimer's and Related Disorders Association."

"It matters not what form of Dementia you have," Morrow said. "We're here to help no matter which kind."

Some populations seem to be more at risk of suffering from Alzheimer's, she said, with Black Americans being twice as likely as white Americans and Hispanic Americans 1.5 times as likely. Two-thirds of Americans living with it are women. Women also commonly acting as caregivers.

The Alzheimer's Association helps people navigate the journey, whether caregiver or patient.

"We know that it takes a toll on caregivers especially," Morrow said. "They report higher levels of physical problems, depression, things like that. It takes a financial toll. It can be a long disease going anywhere from two to 20 years so if you're talking about long-term care it can get expensive."

Though Morrow said most are familiar with the memory portion of the disease, it also goes into thinking and behavior, progressing until death. That's one thing researchers are trying to change.

Treatments in the past addressed only the disease but not the underlying cause, according to Morrow.

Now, she said, new drugs on the market work to get to the bottom of the disease.

"A certain protein gunks up the brain and makes it not work properly," Morrow said. "These drugs help address that, given as an infusion twice a month."

She said the drugs are still new and the association is working with physicians to have infusion centers across the country.

“We have always advocated for early detection and diagnosis mostly because at that time there’s a lot of peace in knowing you have a say in your care, in the plan, perhaps you’ve been waiting to take that big trip of a lifetime,” Morrow said. “You might want to do it now. But the good news is that in that time treatments have moved so rapidly that now the treatments we’ll talk about now are only effective in the earliest stages of these. Now more than ever it is critical to get an early diagnosis because there are treatments on the market that can get you more time and save that cognition you would be at risk of losing.”

She shared some key warning signs to watch out for.

“I think it’s key to differentiate between what is normal aging of the brain and age is the largest risk factor for the disease,” Morrow said, adding that signs of dementia are more than just a person walking into a room and forgetting what we went in for.

“Those types of things are a normal part of aging,” she said. “It’s when you really forget things. Someone once said it’s not just forgetting where your checkbook is. It’s forgetting what your checkbook is for.”

Morrow also said to look out for anytime you have something that is impacting your daily life.

“If there was a recipe that your mother always knew like the back of her hand and suddenly she can’t remember how to put those ingredients in order,” she said, “or your dad loved to golf twice a week and suddenly he has no interest in golfing anymore because he can’t remember how the game goes. Those are things we would suggest you go talk to your physician about.”

A physician can help distinguish between early signs of dementia and other causes.

Morrow shared how a relative believed she had dementia but the symptoms were actually caused

by a lack of good sleep, presenting problems in a way similar to dementia.

Primary care physicians, she said, have baseline assessments they can do right in the office at an annual wellness check.

Though age is a risk factor no one can change, Morrow said there are other modifiable risk factors such as controlling diabetes, eating right and getting a good night’s sleep.

“Research is showing that what is good for your heart is good for your brain,” Morrow said. “So all those things that you know about combating heart disease are also good for your brain.”

Challenging your mind and learning anything new is another way to keep your mind sharp, she said.

The Alzheimer’s Association is there to help with a 24/7 helpline staffed by masters-level social workers.

“This is a fantastic resource, especially for a state like ours where we’re so far apart,” Morrow said. “It’s even great for people who work in long-term care and would like some strategies on how to be a better caregiver.”

The Alzheimer’s Association has a support group in Vermillion, she said, and is working to establish similar groups across the state.

Those wishing to get involved in the association can help with support groups, fundraising events and helping with public policy.

One of the most important takeaways, according to Morrow, is if you or someone you know is impacted by this disease that you know you are not alone and there are resources and support available for you.

Sharing information with people you know can also make a big difference to someone who does not know where to find the answers to questions they have.

For more information on the Alzheimer’s Association and how you can help or find resources visit <https://www.alz.org>