

JT News

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***** Special Care Units for
Patients with Alzheimer's Disease

EDITOR'S NOTE—There will be an Open House at the Corinth Manor Alzheimer's Unit, 944 South Corinth Street, on Sunday, April 13, from 2-4 p.m. Several members of the unit's staff will be available to give tours and answer questions.

DALLAS—He was the most intelligent man she knew. But during the last several years, Kay King has watched her father, a petroleum engineer who transacted business throughout the world, slowly lose his memory and his mind.

King's father, like more than three million other Americans, is a victim of Alzheimer's Disease—a progressive brain disorder estimated to be the fourth most common cause of death in adults, following heart disease, cancer and stroke. Although most Alzheimer's victims are over age 65, the disease can strike as early as age 40.

King first noticed changes in her father's behavior when he was in his early 60s. "He began to complain constantly," she says. "He couldn't keep up with his finances, would drive the wrong way down the street and began to get lost in his own home. Now, he's to the point that he can't even dress himself."

The opening in Dallas of a 27-bed unit specifically for Alzheimer's patients is designed to provide families such as King's with specialized care for their loved ones. The project is a joint effort between Corinth Manor Nursing Home and the federally funded Southwest Long Term Care Gerontology Center at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

In addition to patient care, the project is dedicated to clinical research and training for professionals and health care students who work with dementia victims. Dr. Paul Chafetz, a clinical psychologist who will help conduct the research as director of interdisciplinary education at the gerontology center, says the unit is different from other facilities that provide only care for dementia victims.

"We are taking care one step forward," he says. "Other places provide 100 percent care, but we also add 100 percent research and 100 percent training."

The gerontology center team will conduct research using a control group from another nursing home in the community that also cares for Alzheimer's patients. The resulting data base and the unit's university affiliation make it a one-of-a-kind facility.

The design of the Alzheimer's unit, which is completely separated from the rest of the nursing home, is simple and bold. The researchers will use stimulus control techniques to orient the patients to their new environment.

"We want them to learn to associate, for example, that the color green means fun," says Jean Norwood, Corinth Manor administrator. "That's why the doors to the game rooms and the backyard are painted bright green. The doors to the restrooms are yellow, and the doors to their rooms will be another color."

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"We're trying to create a stable, yet simple environment for them," she says.

Since Alzheimer's patients usually are hyperactive, activities such as walking, singing, dancing and arts and crafts are planned to help keep patients busy. "Many patients are easily agitated, like to wander around and refuse to sit still for any length of time," says Dr. Helen West, associate professor in the gerontology program at UTHSCD.

"Most nursing homes will treat these patients with tranquilizers, which often make them more disoriented and confused," she says. "We want to use behavior management instead of drugs. In addition, we want to see if there are points in the progression of the disease where this treatment is more effective."

Family members also will have the opportunity to be involved in the unit's activities. The researchers are interested in the impact that family involvement has on both the patient and the family.

The unit's staff members are being specially trained by the researchers to work with Alzheimer's patients. The researchers will then compare Corinth's staff turnover, morale, attitudes and knowledge of the disease to the staffs at other nursing homes. "We want the staff to work together as a team," says Chafetz.

The staff also will monitor the diets of Alzheimer's patients, who usually eat quite a bit more than other patients. Because they are hyperactive, the patients do need more calories, but this problem is complicated by the fact that many patients can't remember when they've eaten. Their weights must be carefully watched.

"We will look at the quality and characteristics of the food they eat," says West. "Foods high in caffeine and refined sugar may actually contribute to their hyperactivity. By monitoring what foods they eat, we hope to develop diets that can help normalize their hyperactivity and reduce agitation."

Once patients have been placed in the unit and studies are under way, researchers will begin to compile data on how much it costs to run an effective unit. The Texas Department of Human Services and the State Department of Health are interested in these findings, as is anyone who has been touched by this devastating disease.

Norwood says she has been receiving numerous calls each day from across the country. "Once they find out that the unit is part of a study in conjunction with UTHSCD, they immediately want more information on the admission process," she says.

Before they can be admitted to the Alzheimer's unit, patients must undergo a three-day clinical assessment at the health science center. Specialists in neurology, psychiatry and psychology examine the patients, review their medical histories and meet with family members. Residents who are selected and their families are expected to participate in the educational and research activities of the program.

Kay King's father was one of the first patients selected for the program. After years of in-home care and live-in nurses, in addition to stays at several different nursing homes, King says this unit is a "godsend."

"We've tried everything, and we think this is the answer," she says. "It will be a comfort to know that he is being cared for in the best possible way. Even if it's too late to help Daddy, I still hope that the research done at the Alzheimer's unit can eventually help someone else."

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