



Philip Walker, Record staff

Brian Mitchell has Alzheimer's disease, and his wife Gail cares for him. Watching his deterioration can be tough to handle, Gail says.

Alzheimer's disease devastates families Strain of constant caregiving takes a toll, experts say

By Johanna Weidner, Record staff

WATERLOO — Gail Mitchell doesn't know quite what to expect with each day.

What will her husband Brian Mitchell forget today? How will he handle an outing? Will he do something potentially dangerous?

Life has not been the same since Brian began showing signs of Alzheimer's disease, which is slowly robbing the Waterloo man of his memories, abilities and independence.

While Brian is mostly unaware of the difficulties caused by the progressive, degenerative brain disease, the daily strain exhausts Gail.

She does her best to cope with the tough situation and loss of the husband she knew.

"Things change," Gail said.

Brian was an engineer who could build and fix anything. He carefully tended the yard and garden. He did all the driving at home and on the couple's many vacations.

Now Brian doesn't like to be alone. He has trouble finishing a simple task like drying dishes. He forgets names of grandchildren.

The deterioration is tough to handle, causing stress and sadness.

"I get very frustrated," Gail said.

And "it's sad for me to sort of see the fact he can't enjoy the things he used to enjoy before."

Caregivers suffer great physical and psychological strain, often leading to burnout and illness, said Julie Wheeler, executive director of Alzheimer Society Kitchener-Waterloo.

Watching a loved one succumb to the disease is a terrible burden.

"It's heartbreaking," Wheeler said. "It's just the slow death of someone you love most."

The majority of the services provided at the chapter, including support groups and counselling, are for caregivers and family. A growing number of people are turning to the group for help, in particular those with early onset Alzheimer's disease under 65.

The national Alzheimer Society warned in a recently released report that the prevalence of dementia will more than double in the next 30 years and the costs to the health-care system will increase tenfold.

Across Ontario during that time, the number of people with dementia will reach about 395,000 and new annual cases will triple to almost 99,000.

In Waterloo Region, about 6,500 residents are living with dementia.

Wheeler said action needs to be taken now to handle the coming strain on the health-care system, communities and families.

"It's a concern for all of us," Wheeler said.

The Kitchener-Waterloo chapter of the Alzheimer Society recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. The group offer supports, raises awareness about the disease and funds research.

January is Alzheimer Awareness Month, and the annual Manulife Walk for Memories fundraiser will be held on Jan. 31 in Waterloo, Cambridge and communities across the province.

Gail noticed her husband's memory wasn't as sharp as it used to be about six years ago. A memory test by their family doctor revealed he scored below normal, but still not in the range of those with Alzheimer's.

The next year he was a bit worse, and then about four years ago Gail's worries were confirmed. Brian had Alzheimer's disease and he needed to start on medication.

“It doesn’t bring the memory back and it doesn’t make him better, but perhaps it slows it down,” Gail said.

Brian, who’s 68, lost his driver’s licence and the couple recently moved to an apartment from their house to make it easier on both now that Gail has to look after most household chores.

“It’s amazing how things have changed,” said 65-year-old Gail.

Brian goes to two day programs and has a companion from the Alzheimer Society who comes for visits — giving Gail much-needed breaks from the constant vigilance.

“He’s much more difficult to look after than my son ever was,” she said.

Caring for a family member with dementia is an adjustment because personality changes as the disease progresses, said Christopher Wynn, whose father had early onset Alzheimer’s disease at only 57.

Wynn moved home to help his mother with the care and started videotaping his father as his health worsened over four years until his death. His documentary *Forgetful Not Forgotten* will be played at the Kitchener Public Library this month, chronicling the family’s journey.

“The disease becomes more about them than the person who has it,” said Wynn, who lives in Montreal.

Alzheimer’s disease is a devastating diagnosis because there’s no cure and still the brain disease is not well understood. Wynn believes hearing a personal tale like his helps families facing an uncertain and painful future.

“You feel like you’re not alone.”

Alzheimer Awareness Month events

A screening of the documentary *Forgetful Not Forgotten* will be held at the Kitchener Public Library on Jan. 19. Registration is at 6 p.m. and then the film screening is at 6:30 p.m. After the screening, filmmaker Christopher Wynn will talk about his experience caring for his father and making the documentary.

Reservations are required. Call 519-742-1422.

The annual Manulife Walk for Memories is on Jan. 31 in Waterloo and Cambridge to raise money for the Alzheimer Society. Find out more at www.walkformemories.ca.

Last year, almost 6,000 participants in communities across Ontario raised more than \$1.4 million to support local programs and services.

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