

A Brief History of Alzheimer's Disease

By Michael Plontz

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Caregivers, especially those who are new to care giving, usually absorb—like sponges—information on their loved one's ailment(s). Here at caregiver.com, we are dedicated to providing as much useful information as possible to our readers. While the following information may not be as practical as most, it is very interesting to track the history of a disease that is now one of the most researched diseases in the world. Scientists are racing to find a cure as millions of people reach the age when Alzheimer's is most commonly manifested.

In the early 1900's a physician named Alois Alzheimer provided care for a patient with rapidly declining severe dementia. After she died, he was able to perform an autopsy on her brain. Advances had recently been made in histology and microscopy, so Alzheimer was able to study, in detail, the cellular changes in the brain's nervous tissue. What he found was an atrophy of the gray matter surrounding the brain. He also found bundles of neurofibers and the plaques that are now a distinguishing characteristic for a definitive diagnosis of what we call Alzheimer's Disease today.

The term Alzheimer's Disease was coined by Emil Kraepelin who, from a biological point of view, studied psychiatric disorders. The term first appeared in public in print in Kraepelin's book *Psychiatrie* and it caught on. Dr. Kraepelin was so impressed with Dr. Alzheimer's work that he appointed him to the head of pathology at a psychiatric institute in Munich that is now called the Max Planck Institute.

No one had a problem accepting Alzheimer's as a distinct disease state. In spite of that, it didn't gain much attention for the next few decades. However, that has changed recently for a number of reasons. The chances that any of us will contract an ailment associated with aging are greater due to advances in the medical and safety sciences. We are staying alive for many more years than we used to. The population surge that occurred shortly after World War II also complicated matters. Our population contains a larger percentage of older people than ever. In fact, the number of Alzheimer's patients could triple to 14 million in the coming years.

Another reason that Alzheimer's has recently gained greater importance is diagnostic in nature. People usually do not die from the disease itself, but from complications due to the disease such as pneumonia. In the earlier part of the last century the cause of death would be listed as pneumonia. Now, because of significant advances in research and increased awareness, Alzheimer's is listed as the primary cause of death.

As many of us have parents and grandparents reaching the age where Alzheimer's commonly occurs, research is making giant strides in finding out more about the disease and possibly discovering a cure. One organization that has dedicated itself to that end is the Alzheimer's Association. This organization was founded twenty years ago and since then has awarded grants over the \$100 million mark. This makes it our nation's largest private funder of research.

"Every minute, every day, scientists learn something new about Alzheimer's disease. The momentum of research is building, fueling excitement and moving scientists closer to understanding the causes of Alzheimer's," says Brenda Johnson, Executive Director of the Greater Miami Area Chapter. "Many of today's clinical discoveries are the result of basic science research funded over the years by the Alzheimer's Association."

As the "baby boomer's" parents reach retirement age, it is imperative that we find a cure for this insidious disease before it reaches epidemic proportions. Donating money is always a good way to help, but another, more hands on way, is to get your loved one involved in a clinical trial. We should all do what we can because, after all, we aren't getting any younger.