

UNDIAGNOSED DUE TO LACK OF AWARENESS

BY MUHAMMAD BASIR ROSLAN

KUALA LUMPUR: Nek Rahmah (not her real name) looked blankly when asked what she ate for breakfast.

"I don't know whether I have eaten or not today," mumbled the 74-year-old resident of Pusat Jagaan Husna Arrashid, an elderly care centre located in Taman Melawati here.

Then, turning to one of the staff members, she asked, "Eh, where am I right now?"

Nek Rahmah has Alzheimer's disease and her short-term memory is impaired. She, however, can recollect her past vividly when her life revolved around her husband and seven children.

"My (late) husband is Yusuf Marchuki who used to work as a (taxi) driver. He passed away a long time ago. One of my children, Abdul Rahman, works as an accountant," she said.

She also remembered sobbing uncontrollably when Abdul Rahman left for the United States to pursue his higher studies.

"I am proud of him," she said.

Alzheimer's disease is an irreversible, neurodegenerative brain disorder that can affect one's mental and social skills as

it slowly destroys memory and thinking skills and, eventually, the ability to carry out simple tasks.

This disease is the most common cause of dementia, a syndrome in which there is deterioration in cognitive function, that is, the ability to process thoughts.

Although the risk of Alzheimer's increases with age, researchers believe that it is not a part of the normal ageing process as not all senior citizens have the disorder.

Three stages

The deputy director of the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing (MyAgeing) at Universiti Putra Malaysia Associate Prof Dr Rahimah Ibrahim said Alzheimer's cases usually go undiagnosed because many family members and caregivers assume that symptoms, such as forgetfulness, manifested by the elderly persons under their care are due to ageing.

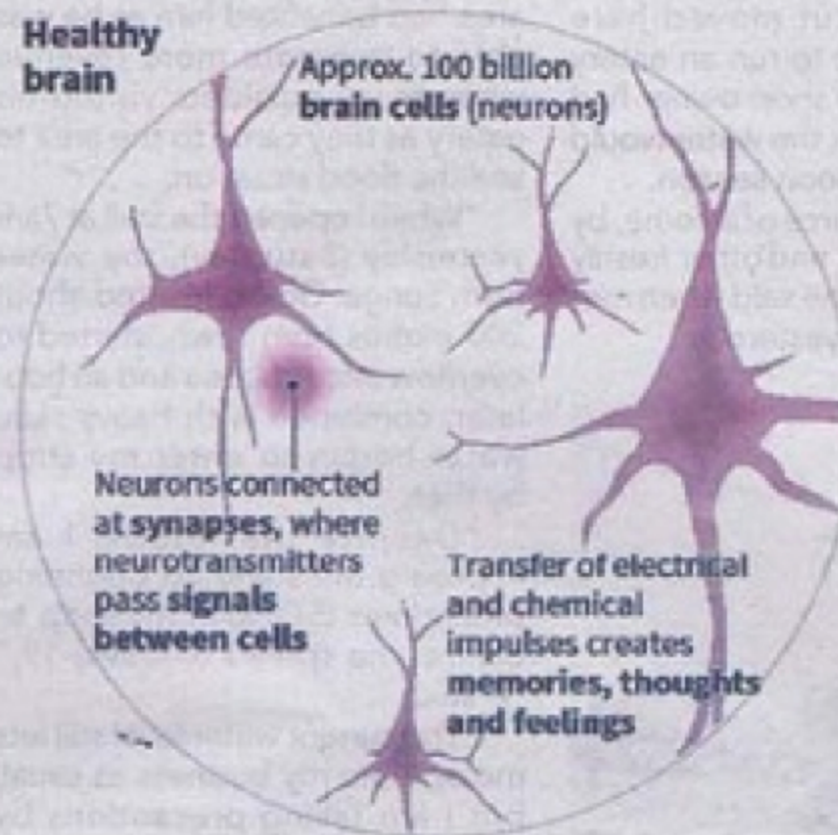
She said improper management of Alzheimer's patients may cause other problems to develop.

"A person suffering from Alzheimer's will find himself or herself drifting into their own imaginary world and this is

Alzheimer's disease

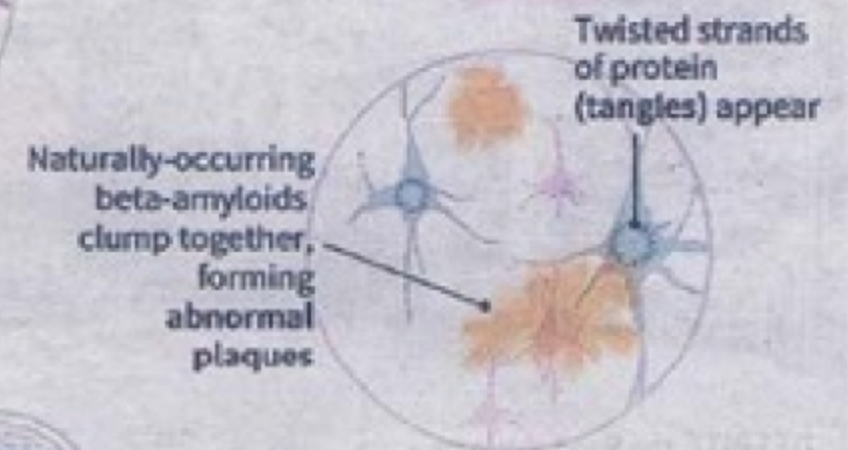
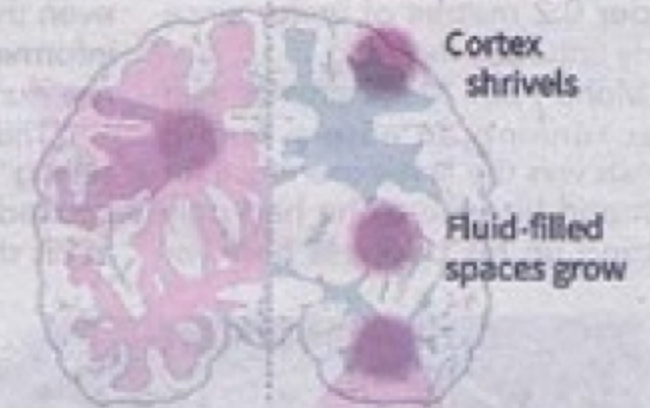
- Causes memory loss, problems with concentration and behaviour
- Develops slowly but is ultimately fatal. No cure
- Accounts for 2 thirds of dementia cases

Healthy brain

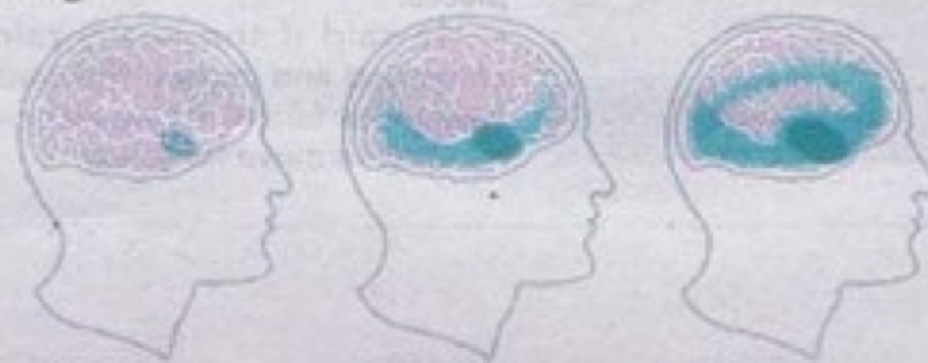


Alzheimer's brain

- ▶ Disease disrupts electrical signals and neurotransmitters
- ▶ Neurons and synapses are destroyed, the brain shrinks



Stages



EARLY

Mild effects on learning and memory. Changes may begin 20 years before diagnosis

MIDDLE

Memory, thinking and planning moderately impaired. May last up to 10 years

LATE

Speaking and understanding severely impaired. Sufferer may not recognise family. May last 1-5 years

Source: World Alzheimer Report 2021, Alz.org

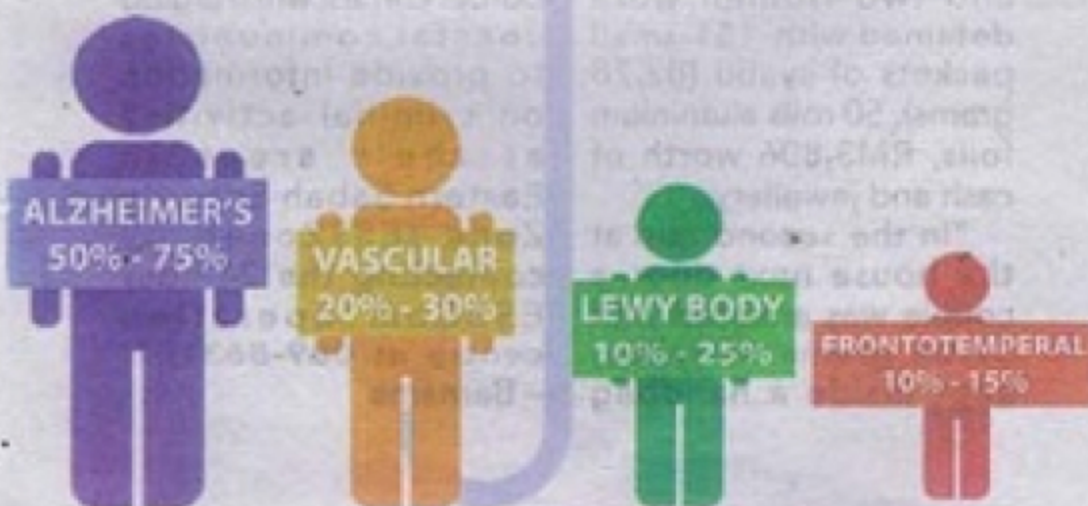
Effect of plaques, tangles

- Tangles may disrupt the neurons' transport system, which moves nutrients, cell parts and other supplies
- Plaques may block cell-to-cell signalling at synapses
- Plaques may activate immune system cells, which trigger inflammation and devour disabled cells

AFP

DEMENTIA

An "umbrella" term used to describe a range of symptoms associated with cognitive impairment.



something the caregiver will not be able to comprehend," she told Bernama.

Rahimah, who is collaborating with researchers from other local universities on a long-term study on cognitive frailty, said the first thing caregivers need to know is the different stages of Alzheimer's disease.

The early or mild stage is associated with memory lapses such as forgetting familiar words or the location of everyday objects, and the tendency to say the same things repeatedly.

In the middle stage, the patient will require a greater level of care as they will show increased tendency to wander and become lost and will also need help to carry out their daily tasks.

In the late or severe stage of the disease, the patient will require round-the-clock assistance with daily personal care. They will have difficulty communicating and as the disease progresses,

they may lose awareness of recent experiences and their surroundings.

Managing Alzheimer's patients

According to Alzheimer's Disease International, Alzheimer's cases worldwide are expected to increase from 35.6 million in 2010 to 65.7 million in 2030 and 115.4 million by 2050.

As of 2020, Malaysia's senior citizen population is estimated at 3.4 million or nearly 11 percent of the total population. This means that one in 10 Malaysians is aged 60 and above.

Rahimah said caregivers charged with taking care of a person with Alzheimer's must make it a point to equip themselves with adequate knowledge on patient management, particularly techniques that can facilitate the handling of such patients without subjecting them to undue pressure.

"The procedures for managing

Alzheimer's patients are not the same as managing normal elderly persons. When a person has Alzheimer's but it is undiagnosed, the family members may think that they are senile and leave them alone but in actual fact, they need to be cared for," she said.

Rahimah said to communicate effectively with Alzheimer's patients, the caregiver should use body language or speak using simple words and short sentences. Avoid using provocative words as it may hurt their feelings, she added.

She said caregivers should also be equipped with the knowledge to plan their patients' daily routine, as well as exercises to stimulate their minds.

She also suggested that non-governmental organisations step up the implementation of programmes in both urban and rural areas to create more awareness of Alzheimer's disease, as well as how to care for elderly persons. — Bernama