

## What was that called again? Ah, dementia

I was walking through the park the other day when a young man galloped past with a cheery greeting: “Hi Jim,” says he. “Hiya,” says I, spending the next half hour trying to recall his name. I knew his face, his voice even, but damned if his name would come to me.

You won’t be surprised, then, if I offer some thoughts on something that affects us all in one way or another, as grandchildren, children, adults, and finally as we approach senior-hood – dementia. We’ve all had someone in the family who’s had it in some form or other, and as we get older we’re confronted with losing friends to this dreaded affliction that robs people of their lives.

There’s been a powerful portrayal of it on one of the TV soaps lately. The vicar of Emmerdale is going through its heart-breaking stages, the man playing the role giving an Oscar-worthy demonstration of what can happen to a sufferer in their 50s.

There are four main versions, judging by the scholarly research websites and those of various organisations offering help and advice. The problem for most of us is the same as that presented by all the other age-related threats to healthy living – how much do we worry about it and how much do we really want to know.

While it seems unlikely dementia has the same family links as some disorders, it’s not unusual in some households, ours included, to cast a wary eye over the family tree at times and wonder how many dementia occurrences there need to be before you begin to worry about a pattern.

I had a couple of uncles (out of nine people in their generation on both sides) who succumbed. We also had one parent who got it. But there’s no discernible form that stands out. When Dad was in his 80s he could list the names of the dozen or more medications that kept him going. Once, he awoke from an anaesthetic and when Mum forgot her credit card password he was able to recite it without pause. Not sure what that meant, but it suggested dementia wasn’t about to claim him.

These days there are more immediate reminders of the disorder’s cruelly random influence. The wife of a close friend in Wellington called recently to say he is now in care with Alzheimers. He seemed to be firing on all cylinders when we left the capital city in 2013.

So, what weight do I put on the forgotten name in the park? Very little. I’ve been a serial name-forgetter since I began work more than 50 years ago. I was so nervous during early interviews I would forget the subject’s name two minutes into the encounter, and had to employ a simple strategy to survive. “So, how is your name spelled then?” I would ask at the end, a question greeted with surprise by those with names like “Smith” (recovery line: it can be spelled with a “y”).

Despite the years of experience since those days, the name thing still happens, although now it’s more likely to occur during social conversations. But I’ve noticed that forgetting the names of people who feature in life’s anecdotes is common among absolutely every person I know who’s into and beyond the late 60s. Social discourse is frequently derailed by name searches.

Does that mean everybody I know is heading for dementia? Probably not. According to the Alzheimer’s Association “the first problem many people with Alzheimer’s disease notice is forgetfulness severe enough to affect their work, hobbies, or social life. Other common symptoms include mood changes, difficulty multi-tasking, misplacing things, repeating things, confusion, trouble with organising and expressing thoughts, and becoming disoriented or lost in familiar places.”

So, like mounting blood pressure and sun damage, name-loss on its own may simply be a symptom of aging. As someone observed the other day: our brains have accumulated so much information they need faster fibre to access data.

An excellent rundown on brain and nervous system malfunctions, including dementia, was given at the Jean Sandel retirement village recently by one of New Zealand’s most eminent neurological experts, Dr Jon Simcock (a former dux of NPBHS). He has published many papers on topics as varied as restless legs syndrome, tinnitus, migraine, “thunderclap” headaches, muscle twitch and amnesia.

JT column for June 10, 2017 - dementia

The Neurological Foundation, for which he is a medical advisor, funds about \$2 million worth of research a year. It gets nothing from the government.