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Sue Ann Says: Alzheimer's Increasing Worldwide – Know the Signs

My brother-in-law is in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease. It started with loss of memory and personality changes and has progressed to the point where he doesn't recognize us nor do we recognize him. I don't know what's more heartbreaking – seeing his decline or watching his caregivers – his wife and children – become physically, emotionally, and financially devastated by this mysterious disease.

The month of November is National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month. According to the 2009 World Alzheimer Report released in September, an estimated 35.6 million people worldwide will be living with dementia by 2010. This number is estimated to nearly double every 20 years, to 65.7 million in 2030, and 115.4 million in 2050. You can imagine why researchers are calling it an epidemic that is increasing its pace with the 'graying' of the population around the world.

According to Tom Hlavacek, Executive Director, Alzheimer's Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, the disease is poised to strike one out of eight baby boomers. "The 2009 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures shows the tremendous impact this disease is having in Wisconsin and nationwide. With over 100,000 people with Alzheimer's disease living in Wisconsin today and with the prevalence expected to grow to 110,000 by 2010, now is the time to develop an effective blueprint to deal with this disease," Mr. Hlavacek told me.

Today, as many as 5.3 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's disease, the seventh leading cause of death in the country and a leading cause of death for those over age 65. Additionally, numerous statistics convey the financial and emotional stress Alzheimer's imposes on individuals, families, government, business, and the nation's health and long term care systems. For example:

- Every 70 seconds, someone in America develops Alzheimer's disease; by mid-century someone will develop Alzheimer's every 33 seconds.
- Women are nearly twice as likely as men to develop Alzheimer's disease (17 percent vs. 9 percent). One in six women and one in ten men age 55 and older can expect to develop Alzheimer's disease in their remaining lifetime. Although it may appear that being female is a risk factor, more women will develop Alzheimer's because on average, women live longer than men, thereby having more time to develop the disease.

(Source: 2009 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures)

Reaping the benefits of Alzheimer's research

"There's a long way to go, but we are beginning to reap the benefits of Alzheimer's scientific advancements made in the last two decades, including anti-dementia drug therapies and

advances in early detection," says Mr. Hlavacek. "I believe the contributions of leading researchers will eventually help us defeat Alzheimer's, and save future generations from this progressive and fatal disease."

In Wisconsin, our Foundation distributed a \$50,000 scholarship to Diana Kerwin, MD for her work investigating the effects of body weight and other risk factors for Alzheimer's disease in women. Dr. Kerwin specializes in Alzheimer's disease, dementia and memory disorders, and was formerly the Medical Director of the Memory Clinic at Froedtert Senior Health-Mind, Mood and Memory Program located in the Community Memorial Medical Commons in Menomonee Falls. [Note: Dr. Kerwin is now working at Northwestern in Chicago.]

In addition, the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) is interested in developing a genetic test for identifying individuals with a greater than 85 percent risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. The test would be used to predict the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and diagnose the disease. It would provide—for the first time—a genotyping method that will predict risk of Alzheimer's disease with 85 to 100 percent confidence; enable people at high risk to be monitored and treated at an early stage, potentially extending their quality of life; and, successfully predict Alzheimer's disease.

Know the Warning Signs – Early Detection Matters

Making the public aware of Alzheimer's warning signs is a big step in combating the disease. "Early detection, diagnosis, and intervention are vital because they provide the best opportunities for treatment, support and planning for the future," says Kristen Crump, Marketing Communications Manager for the Alzheimer's Association, Southeastern Wisconsin chapter. As part of its public education efforts, the Alzheimer's Association has updated its 10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's to make them more current and use-friendly. The signs are a key tool in promoting recognition of common changes that may help with early detection and diagnosis of Alzheimer's

The 10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's

1. Memory changes that disrupt daily life
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems
3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks
4. Confusion with time or place
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships
6. New problems with word in speaking or writing
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps
8. Decreased or poor judgment
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities
10. Changes in mood and personality

Heed these warning signs. Become educated about Alzheimer's disease, if not for you, then for your family members. My sister-in-law and her family would urge you to do that.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sue A. Thompson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned at the bottom of the page, below the typed name "Sue A. Thompson".

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

((sidebar)) **About the Alzheimer's Association**

The Alzheimer's Association is the leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer care, support and research. For more information and local resources, visit www.alz.org/sewi. Contact their 24/7 Hotline, (800) 272-3900 to discuss Alzheimer's with a professional.