

Preparing dementia caregivers at McGill's Steinberg Simulation Centre

By Peter Kerr

There is one medical term that strikes fear into the hearts of families with relatives in the 'boomer' generation: Alzheimer's disease, a form of dementia usually associated with older people. Medical professionals devote considerable time and investment into research for effective treatments and prevention for this disease. In the meantime, patients and especially the families and caregivers who look after a loved one afflicted with dementia need training and support.

The Steinberg Centre for Simulation and Interactive Learning at McGill University's Department of Medicine is an effective training facility for medical students, residents, surgeons and other health care professionals. Imagine the benefits of a flight simulator where pilots can learn without the danger of crashing a real aircraft. The simulation centre is equipped with examination rooms, operating rooms and lifelike mannequins to provide realistic training operations. The centre employs standardized patients—actors who play the roles of a patient's family members, doctors and others who might participate in a real-life medical emergency. Thanks in part to the initiative of Claire Webster, a Certified Alzheimer Care Consultant, and with the support of the McGill Faculty of Medicine, the simulation centre offers community workshops to assist families and caregivers who are living with a family member with early stages of Alzheimer's or other dementias.

Claire lived the traumatic and stressful life of a caregiver when she looked after her mother. The stress of trying to manage her roles of wife and mother in addition to her duties as a caregiver took a heavy toll, eventually resulting in her own burnout. Following her mother's passing, Claire was determined to see if she could establish a way of helping other caregivers. "There are many people like me who don't seek help because they are not being given a "prescription of care" regarding the illness by the medical community and so they try their best to cope silently. Inevitably, dementia is an ever-evolving cognitive and physical illness which requires a tremendous amount of education and support in order to ensure the best care possible of both the individual and the caregivers." Claire earned her accreditation as a Certified Alzheimer Care Consultant and offers her services through her company, Caregiver Crosswalk Inc.

Working with Claire are Dr. José A. Morais and Dr. Serge Gauthier, both leaders in their respective fields. The doctors' professional expertise is complemented by Claire's real-life experience as a caregiver; making the trio a formidable team in helping patients and families. The team also includes Dr. Isabelle Gélinas from the McGill School of Physical and Occupational Therapy as well as a representative from the Quebec Health and Social Services Network.

Dr. Morais is the Director of the Division of Geriatric Medicine at McGill University, the McGill University Health Centre and Jewish General Hospital. In addition to extensive experience in the field of aging, Dr. Morais is also co-Director of the Quebec Network for Research on Aging. He is a specialist in the positive effects of nutrition and physical activity to promote healthy aging.



Dr. José A. Morais, Claire Webster and Dr. Serge Gauthier have established a highly effective training program for families and caregivers working with Alzheimer's and other dementia patients

Dr. Serge Gauthier is a Professor in the Departments of Neurology and Neurosurgery, Psychiatry, Medicine at McGill and Director of the Alzheimer Disease and Related Disorders Research Unit of the McGill Centre for Studies in Aging at the Douglas Hospital. In layman's terms, Dr. Gauthier is a pioneer into research on dementia. While both are highly accomplished in their respective fields, they demonstrate an understanding of the need for practical training and support for caregivers.

In addition to the contribution of their medical knowledge and expertise in the multidisciplinary network, the involvement of Drs. Morais and Gauthier bring important credibility to the program.

"The centre assists families and caregivers living with a relative in early stages of Alzheimer's or other dementia."

Claire has been a guest lecturer on the reality of caregiving at the McGill School of Physical and Occupational Therapy since 2011. In December 2016, she approached Dr. David Eidelman, Vice-Principal (Health Affairs) and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University to discuss how dementia education could be expanded throughout the University. "The Dean was enthusiastic and onboard right away. Two and a half months later, we were on our way to designing and implementing a pilot project to train caregivers!"

Claire worked with leading McGill experts in the field of dementia, and with the team at the Steinberg Simulation Centre, to design a training program for families and caregivers. Simulated encounters were scripted to take place in a model apartment and kitchen equipped with one-way glass to allow clinicians and family members to view interactions between actors portraying patients and their family members. In one scenario, a senior woman with early dementia is preparing to bake muffins for her adult daughter. Mistaking Lysol—a toxic cleaning product—for cooking oil, the mother adds the bottle of cleaning product to the other

ingredients for the muffins. The daughter comes to the stark realization that her mom is not coping, and is in danger. For family members who may be at odds about whether or not their parent is capable, the role-playing scene is a stark and powerful illustration of what could be taking place when their parent is alone.

Similar enactments are available for banking issues, dressing, bathing and other day-to-day activities that are compromised by mental confusion. "We are able to empower families when they see what can happen in this controlled simulation. It's a race against time, and when they see the progress of the disease, they can plan for the future," states Claire. She adds, "The simulation centre also can be used to train people working in retirement residences and care facilities, so that they are prepared before they face a real-life situation for the first time. We can reduce the cost on the health care system by preventing accidents, and by training caregivers to be better equipped with knowledge." Moving forward, the program aims to have a larger impact on the health care system by training not only family caregivers, but also professional caregivers, first responders, and the medical students of the future to heighten awareness and understanding on the specific needs of dementia patients and their caregivers.

Westmount Mayor Christina Smith has already partnered with Claire and McGill to sponsor a public lecture, *Understanding and Preparing for the Reality of Dementia* that will be streamed online: westmount.org/dementiastream and more community outreach is planned for the future.

For more information about the workshops and the cutting-edge work being done at the Steinberg Centre for Simulation and Interactive Learning, please visit <https://www.mcgill.ca/medsimcentre/community-outreach/dementia-education-workshops-support-caregivers> or call 514-398-8978. To contact Claire Webster at Caregiver Crosswalk Inc., please visit www.carecrosswalk.com or call 514-968-4455.