

Dementia's changing face

LU profs participate in international Alzheimer's event

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With the average age of the population steadily increasing, more and more people are being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Later this month, researchers, doctors, caregivers and people living with Alzheimer's disease will gather in Toronto for the 26th International Conference of Alzheimer's Disease to discuss the changing face of dementia. Two professors at Lakehead University will be participating in the conference as keynote speakers and presenting a five-minute video about two research projects currently being conducted in Thunder Bay.

Elaine Wiersma, a faculty member in the public health program at Lakehead, and Mary Lou Kelley, a faculty member in the school of social work and gerontology, are both research affiliates at the centre for education and research on aging and health. Both worked on the video with Tracy Buckler, president and CEO of St. Joseph's Care Group. The five-minute video looks at self-management of dementia and palliative care in long-term care homes for residents with dementia.

"One research project in the video is looking at self-management of dementia, which is looking at people in the early stages and helping them live well with a diagnosis of dementia," explained Wiersma.

Wiersma said that more people in the early stages of dementia are practising self-management. The same approach is used for managing chronic diseases, and Wiersma said Alzheimer's is a chronic disease.

"It's really exciting that we are at the point where we can talk about self-management of dementia," she said. "Before people always assumed that they couldn't live independently, there were stigmas associated with dementia. But we have seen with early stage people, they develop very neat coping strategies. It's really amazing if we can take the skills from people who are managing really well and take it to other people who may not be managing well."

The other research project included in the video looks at the other end of the life span, according to Kelley.

"People with advanced dementia very often enter into long-term care homes and will likely spend the rest of their lives living in long-term care homes," Kelley said. "So the purpose of the project I am working on is to help the long-term care homes to better equip themselves to deliver palliative care and end-of-life care to the population of residence and in particular many of whom have Alzheimer's disease."

Wiersma and Kelley agree that treatment for Alzheimer's has come a long way and conferences like the one in Toronto provide an opportunity for ideas and research from around the world to come together.

"I think there is a lot more that needs to be done," Wiersma said. "The exciting thing is



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Lakehead University Alzheimer's disease researchers Mary Lou Kelley, left, and Elaine Wiersma will attend the International Alzheimer's Conference in Toronto.

that we are at the point, in research, moving there in terms of service, and recognizing people with dementia and their voices and that they want to have a say in how they live their lives and how their care is delivered."

"It's been very recently that we've really understood Alzheimer's disease to be a diagnosis," Kelley added. "I would say that the knowledge is just escalating so quickly in the last 20 years around appreciating it."

The Alzheimer Society of Canada recently released a report stating that there will be a significant increase in the number of people diagnosed with Alzheimer's and dementia. While Wiersma explained there is a lot more

awareness about the diseases, there is still some stigma associated with it.

"The fact that people with dementia are coming forward and saying, I have dementia and here are my experiences with it, it is very exciting," she said. "Here in Thunder Bay and Canada, that is really happening. Some of the stigma has decreased."

The International Alzheimer's Conference will be held in Toronto March 26-29 and will host more than 2,000 delegates from all over the world.

"I think it will be a very rich exchange," Kelley said. "I feel very proud that we are able to contribute to that knowledge exchange."