

Case study

Dementia: The importance of timely diagnosis



Jan Dunne

When a family member is diagnosed with dementia, it's a difficult time for everyone – and Christchurch practice nurse Jan Dunne understands those challenges from a personal perspective.

Jan's husband John was diagnosed with early onset dementia in September 2015. She says her experience demonstrated both the importance of a timely diagnosis and the need for education and support for families.

“My personal experience also showed me there is a real need for support for the spouse of the person diagnosed – particularly for the younger age group. With more and more people being diagnosed with dementia at a younger age, I would like to see more communication and help offered to the families one-on-one, at a practice level.”

Drawing on her own experience, Jan has been able to make a difference for people going through a similar situation, through her role as a practice nurse. “After John's diagnosis, I had to ask my GP for a referral to Alzheimer's support services. So this has now become standard practice at our clinic. It's also about an awareness to listen to family if they have any concerns so that tests can be done as soon as possible – a conclusive and timely diagnosis is really important.”

The diagnosis of a loved one is a real grieving process, she says. “There are huge adjustments to make in your life and it's an emotionally draining time. The role of the spouse is huge and you don't get any break from that. It's also hard to know whether you are doing the right thing or not with every little decision you have to make, so the more support and information you have, the better.”

Jan believes there is a real need for a greater awareness of the illness. “It's about education and getting the word out there to lift the stigma. It's important not to be frightened of these things so we can help make a difference to the lives of those affected by dementia.”

A new resource has been launched to help people to live well with dementia. The *eLearning Dementia Education Resource for GPs and Practice Nurses* is designed to support GPs and practice nurses to build confidence, competence and consistency in assessing, diagnosing and managing mild cognitive impairment and dementia. It is available New Zealand-wide and free of charge at www.goodfellowunit.org/courses/dementia

It includes a wide range of information about dementia, including forgetfulness, what is mild cognitive impairment, diagnostic work-up, and legal implications. The resource is supported by the four regional health alliances and aims to support health professionals with the diagnosis and treatment of dementia and help patients and their families/whānau to live well with dementia.