

## Editorial Board

We are now into the fourth month of year 2004. Council members are busy looking into ways in which we can serve our members and the community better. Firstly, we will present two excerpts of the talk by Professor Kua Ee Heok and Associate Professor Ng Tze Pin at the Seminar on Dementia. We would like to place on record here our appreciation and thanks to the two eminent speakers and our sponsor, Messrs Lundbeck Singapore for their valuable support.

We will also present to you our second book review by Mr KV Veloo. The book title is "Time Flies".

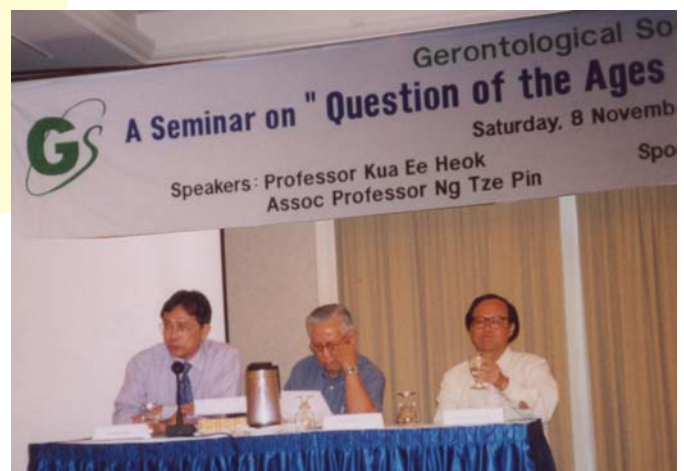


## IN A SEMINAR... "QUESTION OF THE AGE: IS DEMENTIA PREVENTABLE?"

**H**eld at York Hotel, Singapore on Saturday 8 Nov 2003, Professor Kua Ee Heok, PBM, Senior Consultant Psychiatrist from the Dept of Psychological Medicine, and Associate Professor Ng Tze Pin, Director Gerontological Research Programme, Faculty of Medicine, National University of Singapore gave a very interesting and educational talk on "Question of the Age: Is Dementia Preventable?" to about 250 very attentive participants.

Dementia is one of the most devastating mental illnesses that affect older adults, accounting for a large proportion of new cases of mental illnesses in old age and causing significant distress to individuals and their families.

Prof. Kua explained to the participants the latest information about the brain and the ageing process. He also explained to the participants that Dementia is a decline in memory and other cognitive abilities and the decline interferes with daily, social and occupational functioning which lead to



personality deterioration. The two most common types of dementia he said are Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Alzheimer's disease is a brain disorder that impairs multiple areas of cognitive functioning and worsens over time. Onset of the disease is typically insidious, usually beginning with loss of recent memory, then progressively affecting other areas of cognition such as

language production and comprehension.

Assoc Prof Ng Tze Pin, the second speaker held the participants' attention to his talk on Food & Dementia. He told the participants that eating nutritious foods, including adequate amounts of fruits, vegetables, carbohydrates and fiber may have an overall positive effect on cognition. **G**



*Audience enjoying the talk... question time.*

**TIME**

F L I E S . . .



It was out of curiosity that I picked up Bill Cosby's "Time Flies" from a second hand bookstore in downtown San Francisco. I knew him earlier as an actor in the series "I Spy". He starred opposite Robert Culp. I tried not to miss the show. Later in life I followed avidly his hit comedy series, "Cosby Show". Knowing him, I thought it must be a book of

humour reminiscent of the old P G Woodhouse. But behind all the zaniness and hilarity, there is a sombre message: that growing old is a serious business and should not be taken too lightly. Cosby deals with a topical subject on reaching 50 and growing old gracefully. It is also a subject close to our nation.

It is estimated that our aged population, 65 years and above constitutes about 7 % of the population. This will rise to 19 per cent by the year 2030. A large number of the aged are in the fifties.

The Howe Yoon Chong's Report (1984) on the Problems of the Aged observed that the overwhelming majority of the aged, nearly 96 per cent, are living in the community and are ambulant, healthy and fit. It prescribed certain measures to keep them mentally and physically fit, financially independent and socially active with a view to delaying frailty from setting in too quickly. The Jayakumar's Report on the Advisory Council on the Aged (1989) which revisited the earlier report confirmed the main findings of the earlier Committee. It underpinned the importance for the public to view the aged people in a positive light. More recently, the Mah Bow Tan's Report on the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Ageing Population (1999) repeated the earlier calls for older Singaporeans to keep themselves "healthy, active and secure". They should have opportunities for "successful ageing" which means to age "with respect and dignity, and lead independent and fulfilling lives as integral members of their families and communities."

Dr Alvin Poussaint, who wrote the introduction to Cosby's "Time Flies", rightfully observes that, "Growing old begins to concern most of us to some extent when we are in our fifties. But growing old gracefully, in good mental and physical health, is unnecessarily impeded by attitudes in our culture that devalue old age." The aged people need to adopt a positive approach to ageing and accept ageing as not only a physical process but also a state of mind. After all a person is as old as he feels rather than how old his actual age is. It is Mark Twain who said: "Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."

Cosby does not look at ageing from the viewpoint of social demographics or the socio-economic cost to a nation. He does not suggest policies and programmes that need to be designed or implemented to cope with a greying population. His is an anecdotal account of coping with growing age. Activities of living that seemed so obvious and effortless become pronounced and visible at age 50. One suddenly realises that the human

Now, a  
short  
break,  
and  
have  
fun:



A married couple in their early 60s were out celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary in one of the restaurants at Boat Quay. Suddenly a tiny yet beautiful fairy appeared on their table and said, "For being such an exemplary married couple and for being faithful to each other all these years, I will give you each a wish".

"Oo, I want to travel round the world with my dearest husband" said the wife.

The fairy moved her magic stick - and abracadabra! - two tickets for a luxury liner appeared in her hands. Now it was the husband's turn.

He thought for a moment and said "Well, this is all very romantic - but opportunity like this occurs once in a lifetime ... so ... I'm sorry dear, my wish is to have a wife 30 years younger than me."

The wife and the fairy were deeply disappointed, but a wish is a wish...

So the fairy made a circle with her magic stick- and abracadabra! - **WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL FOLLOW?** Please turn to page 5 for your answer.

machine is slowing down. As Cosby laments, "It seems that only yesterday I was fifteen and old people were people of forty, who were always going some place to sit down. And now I am doing the sitting....". How often old people have difficulty in remembering. Cosby recalls how with growing despair he began to hunt for the can of insect spray. He tells himself, "There is no point, of course, in also hunting for your mind: it is permanently lost". He later finds it on his desk only after drifting back upstairs.

Cosby deals with the many day-to-day predictable encounters faced by him with sensitivity, purpose and self-deprecating wit and humour. The events seem so real and their familiarity are quite comforting as if some of them had just happened to you a week before. Any person in his fifties can identify the situations. Cosby faces failing eye-sight and quips on his need for trifocals. He becomes conscious of his weight and the battle he has to keep away from fried egg-sandwiches and buttermilk pancakes. I could not help laughing under my breath when he describes his battle with his belt and growing midriff. "No matter what size belt is strangling you, there are times when it will disappear under a roll of dough", he observes. How true it is with some of us!

Maybe the climax of all his ins and outs of coping with growing old is his anxiety on going to bed. He says:


*"A man of my age comes home late from the office, has dinner, takes a shower, ignores a few bills, and finally makes it into bed. Discovering another person in that bed, and dimly aware that this person is a different sex, he starts to make his move. 'Not tonight', says his wife. And*

*the man rolls over with a smile. Thank you very much, he silently says. His heart had not been in the mood, or any other part. All he wanted really to do was to go on record."*

I have heard many local speakers sharing their experiences on adjustments to retirement but somehow their presentations fell flat or were staid. It could do well if they read the book for some pointers.

Cosby's treatment of his experiences is personalized to the extent that one feels that he is talking about them to a convivial group of friends in a neighbourhood coffee shop. The language is simple, lucid and chatty. It makes for easy reading and one can probably finish the book at one sitting.

I would recommend the book to any casual reader who is probably seeking a quick anecdote for his transient depression.

The Gerontological Society and SAGE could do well in recommending the book to its membership. Indeed, it will prove useful to policy formulators on ageing and programme providers of services for the well-aged who very often are dependent on scholarly works on social gerontology and geriatrics. It will help them to better empathise with the personal needs of the young old as they try to cope with the ageing process. 





# IS DEMENTIA

# PREVENTABLE?

**T**he last decade has witnessed more research on the causes and pathology of dementia especially Alzheimer's Disease and Vascular Dementia. Understanding the biology of dementia has helped scientists to seek new treatments.

Alzheimer's disease is associated with the gene, APOE4. In this disease, there is deposition of amyloid plaques in parts of the brain causing abnormal behaviour and memory changes. It has been suggested that reduction of these plaques can occur with keeping the blood cholesterol within normal limits or taking anti-oxidant agents like Vitamin E, B12 and Folic acid. Anti-inflammation medication like Aspirin and Indomethacin can also reduce plaques formation.

For patients with Alzheimer's disease there is a loss of neurotransmitters like Acetylcholine. There are now new medications that can prevent a break down of Acetylcholine and these include Rivagastimine, Galantamine and Donepezil. Recently, a new medication has been introduced in Singapore called Memantine. This medicine acts on the Glutamate transmission pathway in the brain to prevent cell death.

In vascular dementia we know that there is association with hypertension, diabetes, stroke and smoking. Therefore prevention of dementia can occur if the hypertension and diabetes mellitus are well controlled. If patients

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with these illnesses are well stabilized with medications and diet, the chances of developing dementia is less likely.

In both vascular dementia and Alzheimer's disease, mental activity like reading and learning new things are also preventive measures. These will include reading daily papers, books, playing chess or learning a new language. In Singapore, of course, playing mahjong is a good mental exercise for elderly people. Physical exercise can reduce calories and improve health. Social activities, like dancing and hobbies are encouraged because they promote interaction and prevent social isolation and loneliness.

We hope future research can help us discover a definitive cure for Alzheimer's Disease and perhaps a vaccine to prevent this most debilitating illness in late life. **G**

## Answer

The husband became 92 years old. You see... Men are sweet. But fairies are ... females!

# FOOD & DEMENTIA

By Associate Professor Ng Tze Pin  
Director Gerontology Research Programme  
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**R**esearches have suggested that many plant and animal products are potentially beneficial for neurodegenerative diseases that affect elderly people. Natural plant products called 'phytochemicals', include vitamins from fruits and vegetables, polyphenols from green tea, flavonoids and terpenoids; from herbal plants such as ginkgo biloba and ginseng, and polysaturated fatty acids from fish. Many of them are known to possess anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-allergic and anti-proliferative properties that are potentially beneficial in slowing cognitive and functional declines of aging and the progression of dementia. Unfortunately, in this field, there is much hype and little evidence to substantiate exaggerated claims of beneficial effects. New experimental and animal research findings are very quickly adopted and used by industry and consumers before they are substantiated by firm clinical research evidence in humans.

Vitamin B, in particular, folate and B12 is strongly believed to be beneficial because severe deficiency in vitamin B12 and folate have long been known to cause dementing and neuropsychiatric illnesses. Recently it has also been discovered that many elderly people have clinically undetected deficiencies in folate and vitamin B12, and they are more common in those who show cognitive decline of age and dementia. It has also been shown that elderly people who have low levels of folate and B12 are more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease subsequently. A few studies have suggested that demented or cognitively impaired persons who were given folate and B12 supplements improve on their cognitive testing, but more rigorous clinical studies are required to confirm these findings.

Dietary anti-oxidants such as vitamin A, C and E have been widely touted as free radical scavengers. The studies in human subjects have produced very mixed results, some positive, others negative. So far, there has only been one study that has demonstrated the beneficial effect of vitamin E on Alzheimer's disease patients.

Polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) including omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids are present naturally as structural components of nerve cell membranes in the brain. There is evidence that people who consume large amounts of fish rich in omega-3 fatty acid are less likely to subsequently develop cognitive impairment and dementia. Recent research suggests that the relatively higher ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 in modern diet might be detrimental to cognitive functioning,

Ginkgo biloba has been very extensively studied. They are already commercially promoted and used both clinically for the treatment of dementia patients and as a cognition-enhancing health product ('smart drug') by healthy individuals. Many clinical studies have been conducted, and there is sufficient evidence that ginkgo biloba can thwart deterioration of mild to moderate dementia and Alzheimer's disease. However, there is no firm evidence to support the use of ginkgo biloba as a 'smart drug' for memory enhancement in healthy people without cognitive deficits.

Ginseng is widely used for its benefits in reducing fatigue and physical stress and improving stamina and memory. Although numerous experimental studies have shown ginseng can improve cognitive performance in animals, its benefit in humans is still doubtful. **G**

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