

Living with Alzheimer's Disease: A Wife's Perspective

Bethany Chaffin

Frank, please sit up here," I pleaded, patting the doctor's examination table and urging my husband forward. I was trying to be patient. By nature I move fast, and holding myself back to accommodate his slowness could wear me out faster than manual labor.

Frank turned in the opposite direction, as if he hadn't heard, or, as if he were willfully disobeying. But I knew Frank was not merely stubborn. His brain was giving his body the wrong commands.

Frank has Alzheimer's disease, an irreversible, untreatable shrinking of the brain which produces neurofibrillary tangles and plaques, disrupting the connection between synapses and shattering the brain's faculties. Although Alzheimer's Disease occurs in only 5 to 6 percent of Americans over sixty-five, that's one and one-half million people. It is the fourth leading cause of death for those over sixty-five. It ravages not only the patient but the patient's family. Mood, memory, and personality changes lead to the loss of individuality long before the death of the body.

To date scientists are baffled by the possible cause, or causes, of Alzheimer's Disease. A number of theories are popular: an oversupply of aluminum in the body; chemical imbalance (autopsies always show a lack of acetylcholine which acts as a neuro-transmitter in victims' brains); a deficiency in the production of protein; genetics; malnutrition; a long-acting virus, and possibly stress, although this is probably a precipitating factor, rather than a cause.

BETHANY CHAFFIN is a long-time teacher who now specializes in teaching creative writing to adults. She is a mother of four grown children, wife of an Alzheimer's patient, and a freelance writer-editor. Moving from Salt Lake City to Mantua, a small town east of Brigham City, Utah, was planned to give her more time to write. However, since residing there, she has become immersed in civic responsibilities by establishing a town library. She acts as teacher-trainer and Cultural Refinement leader in her Ward and as Stake Primary Chorister. Ever on the lookout for new material on aging, she has written over a dozen articles on Alzheimer's disease as well as on other medical subjects, and she has published humor, music, feature stories, poetry and plays as well as two novels and three non-fiction books which are in print at the present time.