

The College of  
Family Physicians  
of Canada



Le Collège des  
médecins de famille  
du Canada

Stories in Family Medicine

Récits en médecine familiale

AMS  
Making a Healthy Community  
ASSOCIATED MEDICAL SERVICES



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## On diagnosing Alzheimer dementia

Shane Neilson MD CCFP

*I'm telling you what you cannot understand.  
I wonder if we are lost, or merely waylaid;  
where the ultimate question, and your smile  
belies years receding into perfection.*

*I said the diagnosis as if there were sense to be made,  
meanwhile there was your husband who said  
I'm dying inside. Self-diagnosis makes my job easier.  
I look at you, who can still command appearances,  
who has not yet receded from the human.*

*Did you know that, at the end, you may lose your smile?  
You will only have a few months to live then,  
poets speculate as to why. Doctors sign the death certificate.  
When is not up to us, you and I, I'm afraid,  
and your husband looks at me with forethought.  
You are smiling and social, a perfect acquaintance at a party,  
and that there are drugs seems an afterthought.  
Much is after,  
D-day, and the before is taking care of itself in an Elysian field,  
or developing in a darkroom, or nowhere.*

*Do not remember me, or what I say; look at your husband  
in the dementia of meaningfully. There are still allotments.  
Take heed of what is left, build a life raft for goodbye,  
and when we cease to love, there is time to forget.*

Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page e43.



La traduction en français de cet article se trouve à [www.cfpc.ca](http://www.cfpc.ca) dans la table des matières du numéro de janvier 2010. Cliquez sur «Past Issues», puis sur «January 2010».

She had a kind of swoopy face: all undercut, with occasional brightness. She couldn't remember what day it was, volunteered the year as 1992, and went through my mental tests with frustration and alacrity, looking to her husband for encouragement and reassurance. She looked at the clock face ticking down when she tried to represent the clock face. It still came out wrong. Ten minutes to eleven, she said. Then eleven minutes to ten. Then ten. There were two wavy arms that pointed to nether space, a chaos clock.

She still looked good: outside of my office, I'm sure people would whisper, *Not her*. Her appearance, or sense of it, was likely formed early, and therefore would be late in leaving. A blue dress, but a blank look. She was forgetting things around the house, and buying three of things, and last week she had forgotten the way home.

There is a point in the testing process where I ask the patient to write a sentence on a blank sheet. *Any sentence, I say. Anything at all.* I have written a poem about this very component: in it I have said it is as close as I get to human souls. The truthful ones write, *I hate this*, and the wrecks write, *Write a sentence or Anything at all*. The genial ones say, *You're a good doctor*, and the conversationalists say, *It's nice weather today*. This woman, when pressed to write a sentence, wrote: *I fear for my husband*. She was gone, but not far gone; she knew she was going, and could see him grieving her, and when I asked him how he was doing she looked at him with the smile of a new bride, and then looked down at the floor when he said, *I'm dying inside*. It was the line of a bad soap: *I'm dying inside*, and it was delivered by a dying

man. One never knows about love until it is backed up against the wall, and this was his sentence. He listened closely to her answers, as if something could still be divined; and he half knew that that time had passed.

She was dressed in chenille, and for a farm wife, she was well-appointed, of the generation that dresses up to see the doctor, but not so old that she had the perm of frizzy white hair and badly applied lipstick. She was still young. I wondered, looking at her, what kind of sentence I'd write if I were in her position. Probably *Leave me alone. Or Fuck off, I'm fine. Or Has it come to this, that doctors need to ask the time?*

I had to mention drugs. They are the oblivion of hope; they are the last resort of last makings; they do undetectable business. Less of a precipice, perhaps. I had to mention the support provided by the Alzheimer Society, and there were sentences that kept coming to mind, things wholly inappropriate, like *Hold her* and *Dance her out into the parking lot*. I felt like saying, *The clock is merely a symbol, and I am not a master of it*. But I am strange sometimes. And the mood was funereal and such advice is not for doctors; I am locked into the sentences I have spoken before, many times, for in repetition is the rendition of perfection. A mentor once taught me, *Say the same things in the same way and you will say them right*. I had individuals in front of me, breaking down in individual ways; I was dull, and the best I could manage was a kind of doom-tinged reassurance.

The music out in the corridor, the avenue of permanent soft rock, was Sarah McLachlan's "Angel." The sun was slanting through the window; it was late in the

afternoon on a cold day, the snow was flying, and I do not want this power, for it is not the power of healing, but rather the power to maim, and though death was pressing close, against the window, leering, she looked alive: ready to go home and cook, even though that was no longer safe; ready to forget what I have just said, and fuse the sentences in her mind into fumbling questions, like *Why am I here?* And *Why does my husband look at me this way?* I wonder about Sarah and her song, *oh beautiful release*, and Sarah's advice, which is my advice, that it is the endlessness that we fear, and I must be a sap, pop songs have relevance, and I am startled out of my digression when I see that she knows the words, is humming the song, and this is one way to the end. Her husband is shaking his head, stuttering over immensity, at the unchangeability, and they walk out of the office hand in arm. We agree to meet in a few weeks to "review the results." I always think that the results are not worth us. ❁



**Shane Neilson MD CCFP**

Winner, AMS–Mimi Divinsky Award for History and Narrative in Family Medicine for a Story Written in English.

Dr Neilson published *Meniscus* with Biblioasis Press this year. He is a physician in Erin, Ont.

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## Into the spirit world

Andrew Lodge MD

**H**e might go this weekend. Just keep him comfortable."

I was on call for the small hospital for the weekend. There was one inpatient who had come in earlier on Friday with acute shortness of breath. He had a long cardiac history and was essentially palliative. He was all right with that. He was an aboriginal guy, and pretty traditional in his mindset. I got handover from his doctor, one of the three in town.

"Oh yeah," she stopped at the door on her way out. "He has an implanted defibrillator. It's never fired though. Maybe it doesn't work." She paused again. "He cried when he found out that he had it put in. I remember. He

came back from the city and they had put it in. But he hadn't understood when they explained it to him. Same old communication barrier. When he came back, and I told him about the procedure that he had had done on him, he cried and said that he didn't want to be shocked back to life when he died."

I got a call around 8 PM the next day. The nurse sounded stressed.

"He just got a huge shock. His wife said it lifted him off the bed. I think it's his defibrillator."

The thing that supposedly didn't work had fired. It did work.

I walked out the door of my house. The moon shone pale and full, and a faint breeze rustled through the trees. I looked down the lane. There were lots of grizzlies in

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