

Alzheimer's Patients Feel Pain Too

By Rebecca Rengo MA, MSW, LCSW, ACSW

Bernie is a short, elderly gentleman with white hair, round glasses, and missing teeth. Although he has lived in his condo for 20 years, he doesn't know his neighbors. Recent graduates pass through as a launching pad for their lives. It was different when Bernie and his beloved Rose first moved in. Back then, there were couples their age and they knew everyone. Rose has been gone five years now, but it still seems like yesterday. Bernie now lives in his messy, dark living room on the couch.

Bernie walks with a cane due to constant pain in his legs. Both of his daughters live out of town; he is estranged from his only son, however his grandchildren call and stop by from time to time. He sleeps until noon, only gets dressed when he has a doctor's appointment, and always turns down family invitations. During a doctor's appointment with his granddaughter present, Bernie is told he will have to move to assisted living. He has Alzheimer's disease and they are afraid he is not eating right or taking his medicine.

Everyone is sure that once he is settled into his new apartment that Bernie will become more active. However, the weeks turn into months and he refuses to venture outside his door. One day while dispensing his medications, the nurse asks, "Bernie, are you having any pain right now?" According to Dr. Joe Flaherty, Geriatric Division of Internal Medicine Department at Saint Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis Veterans Administration, GRECC, "A rule of thumb for Alzheimer's patients is to assume they can answer yes or no if they are having pain." Karen Stevenson, MS, RN, a Pain Coordinator at William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison, Wisconsin, agrees, "85% of people with dementia are able to use a rating scale."

Bernie told the nurse that "yes," he is in pain. He rates it as a 6-out-of-10. The nurse calls Bernie's physician to get an order for his pain. The doctor orders routine acetaminophen. According to a study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, "There is an effect of acetaminophen on behavior, well-being and psychotropic medication use in nursing home residents with moderate-to-severe dementia" (November, 2005). Nursing home residents with moderate-to-severe dementia who were given acetaminophen were more socially active than those who received a placebo.

John Chibnall PhD, professor of neurology and psychiatry at Saint Louis University School of Medicine and lead study author adds, "Patients who have a history of conditions where pain is a primary symptom, including arthritis, fractures, diabetic neuropathy, chronic low back pain, or headaches, are the most likely to benefit from routine analgesics such as Tylenol®."

Slowly, Bernie started to get up and walk around his apartment. Soon he was in the hall for short distances holding onto the hand rails. He met neighbors and they encouraged him to come to the dining room. One night, Bernie decided he would try to walk down for dinner. When he entered the big room full of tables, he felt overwhelmed, but soon saw friendly faces from the hallway. A group of ladies waved to him to sit at their table. Bernie sat beaming as the women made sure he had enough food, stirred sugar in his coffee, and offered him extra deserts. He went back every night after that. He attended a few activities, but mostly walked to the lobby and watched people. On nice days, he threw bread to the ducks on a nearby pond. For the first time in years, Bernie felt contentment. However, his condition continued to worsen. At a meeting with his physician, his daughters were told that Bernie would have to move from his apartment. He needed more help than what was available at the assisted living facility. Bernie didn't want to leave; he was used to his apartment and had made some friends. He liked his routine. His daughters reassured him that they would find a nice place.

Once in the nursing home, Bernie wouldn't get out of bed. His daughters, the nurses and aides all tried to cajole, plead, and push him to get up. After a time, everyone accepted that the reason he wasn't getting up was, "the

Alzheimer's disease." One day Lakisa, an aide from another floor, was taking care of Bernie. She observed that Bernie was grimacing. She asked if he had pain. He said "no." She heard him moaning and groaning. She then asked if he hurt. Some older adults describe their pain in different words. Again, he said "no." As she was dressing him, Bernie started flailing his arms and screaming. Lakisa stopped and talked softly to Bernie, looking in his eyes. She gently provided reassurance. She screened for the basics: was he dry, was it a comfortable temperature, did clothing fit, was he constipated, hungry, or thirsty? According to Stevenson, "Make sure affective needs are also met. Dementia patients need five minutes of face-to-face contact every day." Once settled down, Bernie rubbed his legs. Looking at Lakisa, he uttered, "It aches."

Lakisa reported Bernie's pain to the nurse who called the doctor. They checked for a UTI and the results came back negative. The nurse used a nonverbal pain assessment tool every time she took Bernie's vitals. She documented his behaviors that are indicators of pain. The nurse updated the doctor about pain scores and behaviors, like the ones Lakisa reported. Bernie was only getting Tylenol PRN. As needed isn't appropriate in this case because Bernie wasn't reporting pain, plus it was chronic. The routine Tylenol had been dropped from his record. The doctor added it back on. Bernie started to get up in a wheelchair, but was still not walking. He remained agitated during care. He was given a low dose of hydrocodone.

It can take awhile to get the right medication and dose for each patient. Through careful observation the dose was adjusted. Bernie stopped resisting care and now walks the short distance to the facility bird cage with his walker. He likes to sit and watch the birds and people, and best of all, Bernie is smiling again.

It's important to treat pain in Alzheimer's patients, just "ask" Bernie.