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Caretakers have seen great strides in treatment for memory support patients

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By DIANE WETZEL

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The Alzheimer's Association has estimated that 5.4 million people in the United State were living with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia in 2011. While the responsibility for their care often falls to family members, eventually many get to the point where they need to be placed in long-term care.

While the cause of Alzheimer's remains a mystery and there is no cure, helping patients maintain a certain quality of life is important to those charged with their care.



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Debbie Schaaf is the supervisor of the Memory Support Unit at Linden Court in North Platte, a position she has held for nearly seven years.

Caring for the elderly is in her blood, Schaaf said.

"I started working in a nursing home when I was 16," she said. "In those days, you could just walk in off the street to work there. After I became a nurse, I tried other things. I worked at a hospital and in a doctor's office, but caring for the elderly is where my heart is."

Long-term care facilities have evolved a great deal since she began her career, she said.

"In the early days of my career, nursing homes were warehouses," she said. "Patients were expected to sleep and eat on a specific schedule, and dementia patients were blended in with others."

The secure unit at Linden Court has room for 56 patients, and is typically full, she said. Today, there are no wards. Patients have private or semi-private rooms. Families are encouraged to bring photographs and keepsakes. The halls, referred to as "streets" are warm and welcoming. Patients are encouraged to keep the routines they were used to, whether it be reading the paper with a cup of coffee in the mornings, or enjoying a beer in the afternoon.

"If we have learned anything about caring for Alzheimer's patients, it's that you cannot make them live in your world, all about reality orientation, but it just doesn't work. I didn't get that until I had training. Their reality is their reality."

you have to live in theirs," Schaaf said. "We used to be that until I had training. Their reality is their reality."

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Schaaf and her staff are certified dementia practitioners, having had specific training to work with dementia patients.

"Our mission is dignity in life, and that's not a cliché," she said. "No matter what stage a person is in, they deserve to be treated with dignity."

It's important to take time to listen, she said.

"These are the people who were our teachers, our farmers, who gave us the life we have today," she said. "They fought wars for us, and were our mentors."

Families of patients are encouraged to remain involved in their care.

"The caregivers are often a child or a spouse and they become frustrated," Schaaf said. "They don't know how to treat them, so we encourage people to seek support like the local Alzheimer's support group. Or come in and talk to us. We have lots of information here in our library. The demented person is fine. They are living in their own world."

Organizations like the Alzheimer's Association are so important because they help raise awareness of the disease, she said.

"Everyone either has someone in their family with Alzheimer's or knows someone who does," Schaaf said. "Events like the Hike to the Spike (the 2012 Walk to End Alzheimer's) gives me hope."

For information, go to www.act.alz.org.



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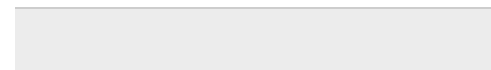
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