

First Link for People with Alzheimer’s and Related Dementia

“I don’t think I really understood what I was in for.” This was Susan’s (fictitious name) realization after first attending a Learning Series held by the Thunder Bay Alzheimer Society. Susan and her husband had moved into her parents’ home to help care for her mother with Alzheimer’s.

At the Learning Series, individuals with Alzheimer’s and their caregivers receive information on what to expect and hear about organizations that can help them. They help participants process the news of their diagnosis and meet others in a similar place in life, providing peer level support in their journey.

According to Beverly, primary caregiver to her husband Barry who has Alzheimer’s, “(The learning series) was very enjoyable; we’re all in a different place. It’s good to have other people in your court that know and understand. I talk to one Social Worker and my husband talks to another. I don’t go to the doctor when I need to talk. I just go to the Alzheimer Society. This is where I’ve got the help and support. They are there for you when you need them for as much as you want.”

The Learning Series is part of **First Link**, which is a direct referral program that links people with dementia and their partners in care to the services and supports needed, from education and clinical support, to respite and in-home care and later to LTC placement, throughout the continuum of the disease. The program’s effectiveness rests on the ability to reach people early in the disease process through a direct referral from a health care professional. Evidence shows the direct correlation between supported caregivers and a delay in entry to Long Term Care.

First Link Thunder Bay has:

- responded to a total of 368 referrals since its launch in February 2009
- served 304 new clients as of Q3 2010/11 (goal was 150 new clients)
- had 922 client encounters as of Q3 2010/11 (goal was 350 encounters)

First Link Kenora/Rainy River has:

- responded to a total of 22 referrals as of Q2 2010/11
- served 41 new clients as of Q2 2010/11
- had 67 client encounters as of Q2 2010/11

The program strives to build stronger links between diagnosing physicians/health care professionals, the Alzheimer Society and the community providers; reduce the overall incidence and intensity of crisis situations and increase the efficiency, coordination and utilization of community resources; and prevent caregiver burnout.

Says Susan, “It’s not just about the patients, but also the caregivers. They are the ones who reduce the burden on the system. They need help, emotional, physical and moral support. The more we give them, the less of a strain it is on the system.”

Fast Facts

- 3200 people in the North West LHIN are currently living with dementia.
- For each person with dementia, an average of 12 other people are affected – translating to 42,000 lives impacted by Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias.
- The single largest risk factor is age, with 1 in 11 people affected by 65 and 1 in 3 over 85. **This year the baby boomers turn 65.**
- Baby Boomers are largely unprepared for their increased risk with 23% not able to identify any early signs. Respondents to the Test Your Knowledge survey are also unfamiliar with the controllable Alzheimer risk factors like obesity, diabetes, heart disease and chronic depression.
- Alzheimer’s disease is not a normal part of aging. It is a fatal, progressive disease that destroys brain function, leading in the late stages to complete dependency and need for 24-hour care.
- Caregivers are mostly family member and shoulder enormous emotional, physical and financial stress; up to 75% will develop physical or psychological illnesses like depression.