

Media Release

IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Lee's story inspires hope for dementia

Lee Martin is living proof that challenging our brains can slow the progression of dementia. The 61-year-old mother of three, who was diagnosed with younger onset Alzheimer's disease four years ago, is determined to beat dementia by keeping her brain healthy.

Her MMSE (Mini Mental State Examination) score has remained relatively unchanged for the past two years, at around 24 out of 30 – an unusual result, according to Neurologist Dr Cathy Short.

The six monthly test is a 30-point questionnaire used to measure cognitive impairment and to track progression of any changes.

"Generally speaking, for someone with dementia, an MMSE score will drop by about two points a year, and sometimes faster when it comes to younger onset," Dr Short said. "The fact that Lee has remained relatively stable is really, really impressive."

Dr Short said Lee's case was noteworthy because she had been proactive in tackling dementia via ACH Group's Tailor Made program. Under the program, Lee has been exposed to activities she has never tried before, including ceramics, jewellery making, golf and lawn bowls. Through the program, she has made new friends and continued to socialise with others who are also living with dementia.

"Once people get a diagnosis of dementia, they tend to withdraw socially, which is probably the worst thing they can do," she says. "Lee maintains social engagement with people and continues to meet new people, which is really positive. What ACH Group is doing with a program like Tailor Made is excellent."

Based at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Memory Disorders Unit, Dr Short has been involved in more than 40 clinical drug trials for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

She said there was growing evidence that challenging ourselves to learn something new could slow the progression of dementia.

"Every time you learn a new skill you're developing new pathways in the brain, building up new connections, building your cognitive reserve."

Neurologists focussed on five non-pharmacological strategies to improve brain health: looking after heart health, regular exercise, eating a Mediterranean diet, embracing mental challenges and social engagement.

Dr Short said while diagnosis rates for dementia had improved, more needed to be done to raise awareness of younger onset dementia, a condition that affects people under the age of 65 years. "When people are in this age bracket, they don't think they can get dementia, so it will often be up to five years before they get a diagnosis," she said. "We know that once diagnosed early intervention can make a big difference to people's lives."

Dr Short said stigma surrounding dementia remained an issue.

"Often people are still working, still being employees, they've got young families – it can be very difficult. Their needs are not met in the community and unlike a diagnosis of cancer, where people are supportive, people find their friends stop contacting them, and they become more socially isolated."

Lee said after four years with ACH Group's Tailor Made program, she felt 'better than ever'.

"When I was first diagnosed, my friends stopped calling me, and I felt like I was on my own and really down in the dumps," she said. "Then I started learning bowls and golf with a group who were going through the same thing, and I have made so many new friends. I just love getting out with them and doing new things. We have a laugh together. I've made up my mind that I'm not going to sit back and let this (dementia) beat me."

ACH Group worked with Lee to access NDIS funds to help in the costs associated with the program. Lee is exhibiting and selling some of her ceramic work in this year's SALA Festival and participated in The Art Bus Australia's 'Remember My Story' program.

Lee's King Charles Cavalier 'TK' has been trained as an assistance dog.

ACH Group's Tailor Made Program was introduced five years ago to support people living with younger onset dementia or cognitive impairment under the age of 65, their families and supporters. Services are 'tailor made' to keep people out and about, physically active and connected to the community. Other programs offered under Tailor Made Program include a tech class, woodwork, walking, yoga, swimming, social nights out and tailored one-to-one support.

Dementia Action Week runs from 16 to 22 September.

End Media Release

ACH Group is a not-for-profit aged care organisation that has been offering services to support good lives for older people in South Australia since 1952. As well as accommodation options across Adelaide, the Fleurieu Peninsula and East Melbourne, the group offers a range of health, wellbeing, respite and support services, help at home and social activities. Our 1700 specialist staff and hundreds of volunteers share the belief that older people should be valued and respected, connected to their communities and in control of their lives.

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