ALZHEIMER’S CAREGIVERS SEMINAR

Dr. Amanda Smith, medical director at USF Health Byrd Alzheimer’s Institute, speaks during a presentation on Alzheimer’s disease Thursday at New Covenant United Methodist Church in The Villages.

Alzheimer’s Awareness
USF Health experts speak with caregivers

By APRIL TOLER
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THE VILLAGES — Having lost her mother to Alzheimer’s disease and coping with a sister who has been diagnosed, Barbara Shelley is familiar with all the things that come with Alzheimer’s.

While Shelley is not necessarily concerned with developing the disease herself, the Village of Santiago resident does worry about her own children and future generations of her family.

That is why she decided to attend the “Alzheimer’s Disease: What Caregivers Need to Know” seminar presented Thursday by the University of South Florida Health Byrd Alzheimer’s Institute.

“Tlf think (seminars like this) help you immensely to get information,” she said. “You hear so many stories and it frightens you; you don’t know where to turn. I think this helps to get information.”

The USF Health Byrd Alzheimer’s Institute is a multidisciplinary center at USF that provides patient care, research and caregiver services.

On Thursday, more than 150 residents attended the seminar at New Covenant United Methodist Church. The seminar was made possible through one of the church’s mission efforts and USF Health’s avowed new commitment to reach out to The Villages community as part of its new partnership with community leaders and medical professionals locally.

For more than four hours, USF staff covered an array of topics including the definition of...
Alzheimer's, from C1

Alzheimer's and dementia, current medications and treatments, understanding Alzheimer’s behaviors, and future treatments and developments.

Dr. Amanda Smith, medical director of the USF Health Byrd Alzheimer’s Institute, started the seminar, which was the institute’s first time presenting the program in The Villages.

Reaching out to, and educating, caregivers is essential, Smith said, especially when dealing with Alzheimer’s.

“Seminars like this help caregivers understand what they are dealing with,” Smith said. “It helps them realize they are not alone; it helps them keep up with the amazing changes in our field … it keeps them informed about research, it keeps them informed about new medical procedures, as well as giving them pearls of wisdom that they can take home and make their day-to-day life easier.”

Smith said one of the most common questions people have is “What is the difference between dementia and Alzheimer’s?”

Dementia is an umbrella term for disorders where the mental functions break down, creating confusion, disorientation and memory loss, according to Smith. Dementia may also cause some trouble with language or completing tasks, Smith said.

There are a number of causes of dementia including strokes, excessive drinking, Parkinson’s disease and head trauma. However, Smith said Alzheimer’s by far is the most common cause of dementia.

Alzheimer’s is a progressive, degenerative disorder that, according to Smith, results in impaired thinking, memory and behavior. Alzheimer’s is characterized by a distinctive pattern of “plaques” — patches of amyloid protein that clump together and cause nerves to die — in the brain.

Although it can be genetic, Smith said mostly it is a function of aging. In fact, currently more than 5 million Americans have Alzheimer’s, according to Smith, affecting 10 percent of people over 65 years of age and jumping to 50 percent in people over age 85.

“Age is the biggest risk factor, and people do worry about it,” Smith said.

Although a number of FDA-approved medications that can help slow the progress of Alzheimer’s have been on the market for some time, there was recently a change in the way Alzheimer’s is defined, a revolution, Smith said, in the world of the disease.

Traditionally, Alzheimer’s has been defined by the state of dementia, when people are already having memory problems and other losses.

However, that is now the third stage of Alzheimer’s, Smith said, giving doctors an opportunity to diagnose the disease before a person is displaying any symptoms.

“I think the key is that before we could only test drugs in that third stage,” Smith said. “Now, with the disease being redefined, the FDA will allow us to go in and target the pre-clinical people (those with no symptoms). “We do have drugs that take plaque out of the brain, but up until now we had to test them in people that were already demented. If we take those same drugs and give them to people that don’t yet have dementia, they may never get it.”

Technology also allows doctors to diagnose Alzheimer’s disease up to a decade prior to symptoms appearing by using Positron Emission Tomography, or PET scans, according to Smith.

The technology, Smith said, allows doctors to see the amyloid plaques in the brain that once only could be detected through an autopsy.

“It really is a revolution in the entire field,” Smith said. “We can see the plaque, tell you if you have it and do something about it.”

Although PET scans are not approved by the FDA for Alzheimer’s diagnosis, Smith said she believes they will be within the next year.

Thursday’s seminar was one of many programs and events that will be happening in The Villages as a result of a recent partnership between the University and The Villages to turn Florida’s Friendliest Hometown into Florida’s Healthiest Hometown.
Medical director speaks to Alzheimer’s caregivers

Amanda Smith, M.D., medical director of USF Health Byrd Alzheimer’s Institute, speaks to caregivers and other interested individuals on the latest information regarding Alzheimer’s disease. Smith’s appearance Thursday at New Covenant United Methodist Church in The Villages was part of a seminar. Pick up a copy of Saturday’s Daily Sun for details on Smith’s message to participants.

Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun