Not all dementia is the same: Understanding the different types

By Raj Kalra, MD

As a physician, I often sit with families who have just received a diagnosis of dementia.

There is usually a pause at some point in the conversation — after the questions about memory loss, safety, and next steps — when someone asks, "What kind of dementia is it?"

It's an important question, and one that is often misunderstood.

Dementia is not a single disease. It is a broad term used to describe a decline in cognitive function that affects daily life. But beneath that label are several different conditions, each with its own pattern, progression, and challenges.

Understanding the differences can help families make sense of what they are seeing.

The most common type is Alzheimer's disease.

This is the form many people are familiar with. It often begins with subtle short-term memory loss — misplaced items, repeated questions, difficulty recalling recent conversations. Over time, the changes become more noticeable. Language becomes harder, decision-making is affected, and daily tasks require more support.

The progression is typically gradual, unfolding over years. Families often describe it as a slow shift, where small changes add up over time.

But not all dementia follows that pattern.

Vascular dementia is often different. It is related to reduced blood flow to the brain, sometimes following a stroke or a series of smaller vascular events. Instead of a steady decline, families may notice a stepwise pattern — periods of stability followed by sudden changes. There may also be more difficulty with focus, organization, and processing information, even early on.

Then there is Lewy body dementia, which can feel unpredictable.

Families often describe fluctuations — good days and bad days, sometimes within the same week. Visual hallucinations are common, as are changes in alertness and attention. There may also be physical symptoms, such as slowed movement or stiffness, similar to Parkinson's disease. It can be confusing, especially when someone seems clear one day and significantly different the next.

Another form that presents in a very different way is frontotemporal dementia. In these cases, memory may not be the first concern. Instead, families notice changes in personality or behavior. Someone who was once reserved may become impulsive. Social boundaries may change. Judgment may be affected. Because it doesn't initially look like "typical" memory loss, this type of dementia is often misunderstood.

In many cases, there is not just one process happening. Some individuals have what we call mixed dementia — a combination of conditions, most commonly Alzheimer's and vascular changes. This can create a more complex picture, where symptoms overlap and evolve over time.

Despite these differences, there are common threads. A gradual change in how a person thinks, behaves, and interacts with the world. A need for increasing support. And a growing reliance on others to help navigate daily life.

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Judgement – continued from page 6

What's happened to Stag's Leap and Chateau Montelena?

Warren Winiarski passed away in 2024, but sold Stag's Leap in 2007 for $185 million. Jim Barrett passed away in 2013; Chateau Montelena is operated by Jim's son, Bo, and Bo's siblings. Miljenko "Mike" Grgich, Chateau Montelena's wine maker, who created the winning chardonnay, passed away in 2023, but started his Grgich Hills Estate Winery one year after the Paris tasting. His St. Helena winery is operated by Mike's daughter, Violet.

Prices: An unfortunate aftermath

In the year of the Paris tasting, a bottle of the Chateau Montelena chardonnay and Stag's Leap cabernet both sold for $7. (*One year later, Chateau Montelena's bottle price was still $7, but the Stag's Leap had jumped up to $7.50!)* Today, the Stag's Leap can be purchased at the winery for $350 and the Chateau Montelena for a modest $75. Both are still bargains compared with the French counterparts: the Chateau Mouton Bordeaux, which sold for $20 in 1976, now sells for over $800; the Bâtard-Montrachet, which sold for $30, now sells for about $2000. Go figure …

What's next?

After many years of unbridled growth, lately it has been a difficult time in the wine industry. There has been a flurry of conflicting health reports about alcohol consumption. That, coupled with a couple of bountiful harvests, resulting in a glut of wine inventory, plus a decline in wine consumption, have all contributed to the downsizing (or even closing) of wineries. Grape contracts have been canceled, resulting in folks ripping their vineyards out or replanting to other crops.

It is definitely a difficult time for grape farmers and for wineries. So the question looms: Is the sky falling and where are we headed? (I'm writing that article right now, but you'll have to be patient, until next month, to read it!).

"Wine is the most healthful and most hygienic of beverages."

–Louis Pasteur

– Squire Fridell CEO, CFO, COO, EIEIO, Winemaker, Vineyard Manager & Janitor
GlenLyon Winery & Two Amigos Winery
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Living Life Well

Living in interesting times

By Jim Shere

Sir Austen Chamberlain, a British foreign secretary in the 1920s, once recalled learning from "one of our diplomats in China" that an alleged Chinese curse warned, "May you live in interesting times." The phrase was never really Chinese; it was instead a rather condescending Western commentary on what was taking place in China. And yet, the times then were, indeed, very interesting.

After graduating from Berkeley in 1904, my grandfather took a position teaching physics in Canton — now Guangzhou — where my mother was born. Soon after he arrived, the Qing Dynasty collapsed in a violent revolution after ruling China for some two-and-a-half centuries. In the chaotic years that followed, warlords and rival factions fought for control, with the support of competing foreign powers. Finally, when students were taken from his classroom and beheaded in the courtyard, my grandfather knew it was time to bring his family back to America.

Interesting times, indeed. Now America finds itself in its own dangerous version of "interesting times" — after some two-and-a-half centuries.

Three times, Americans have struggled to establish a workable government, only to see powerful, polarized forces threaten to drive it onto the rocks of rival agendas and ambitions. The first arose from our revolution against the British monarchy, when the founding generation transformed colonial resistance into a national experiment in self-government. The second came with the Civil War, when the thesis that "all men are created equal" collided with its antithesis — slavery. Today, we face a third reckoning, no less consequential, testing whether this experiment in self-rule can endure — and what kind of synthesis of conflicting forces is needed to sustain it.

After the Civil War, Reconstruction became the national task. Former Confederate states regained representation in Congress, shaping policies that preserved many of the South's priorities. As Reconstruction gave way to the Gilded Age, industrial expansion intensified tensions between ordinary working people and an increasing concentration of wealth. Meanwhile, deep divisions remained between an industrial North and an agricultural South, as they struggled with one another well into the twentieth century.

Modern socialism had emerged in the nineteenth century in response to the inequities of industrial capitalism. In the United States, these tensions became especially visible beneath the superficial prosperity of the Roaring Twenties. As speculation soared and hardship deepened among farmers and workers, the system fractured in the crash of 1929 and the cascading economic crises of the Great Depression, all compounded by the climate disaster of the Dust Bowl. In response, Roosevelt's New Deal introduced an unprecedented mix of regulation and social welfare. Its aim was not to replace capitalism but to restrain its most destructive excesses — though it also heightened the anxieties of those who favored fewer constraints on profit and growth.

The sacrifices shared by everyone during World War II fostered a sense of national unity, yet tensions over the role of government and the structure of society persisted. In the postwar years, economic growth and expanding infrastructure were supported by public investment, even as resistance surfaced in the Red Scare, McCarthyism, and organizations such as the John Birch Society. A divide deepened between competing visions of capitalism and social democracy, freedom and regulation — often shaped by individuals who saw opportunities in encouraging the conflict.

By the time of Nixon and Reagan, political distrust and institutional strain had become defining features of American life. Periods of unrest and scandal, including Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair, eroded public confidence, and while advances were made in civil rights and labor, significant reversals followed. The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 brought about a powerfully partisan media environment, amplifying dissatisfaction and cultivating a nostalgia for a simpler, idealized past, contributing to the emergence of the Tea Party.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War briefly suggested American dominance, but that illusion was shattered by the attacks of September 11, 2001. In the name of security, the Patriot Act expanded surveillance and governmental secrecy, focusing public attention on external threats while economic inequality continued to widen at home. A politics of fear, reinforced by an evolving media landscape, made it easier to justify both foreign interventions and domestic restrictions.

With the rise of the Tea Party, a new wave of politicians entered Washington — largely inexperienced and often skeptical of the very institutions they were elected to serve. Many viewed government agencies as a "swamp," overlooking the stabilizing role such institutions play in a complex society. Long-standing strands of resistance to regulation and social change were reframed as anti-elitism, and a call to "take the country back."

The period following the 2008 financial crisis brought both prolonged recovery and a pivotal Supreme Court decision — Citizens United. By allowing corporations and wealthy individuals to spend unlimited sums on independent political advocacy, the ruling deepened concerns that government could be treated less as a public trust and more as a vehicle for private influence. The idea that government should be run like a business gained traction, though it rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of governance itself.

This brings us to the past decade, shaped by a global pandemic, intensifying climate disasters, and the rise of Donald Trump. Too many lives have been lost, and systems once assumed stable have demonstrated their fragility. The accumulated weight of past decisions — about power, responsibility, and whose voices are to be heard — has brought us to what can fairly be called, as they were in China, "interesting times." After two-and-a-half centuries, tension between opposing forces has reached critical mass, and can no longer be deferred.

If these are interesting times, it's because they matter more than ever before. This is not a curse, but a challenge. We have reached a crossroads and cannot go back. We know the difficult path that brought us here — how we stumbled, how we struggled, and how we sometimes lost our way. Now the time has come to gather ourselves together, to draw upon the strengths of a diverse and often divided society, and to deliberately decide the direction that we must take from here.

Jim Shere grew up in Sonoma County, where he returned from his studies at UC Berkeley and USF to raise his family in 1980. He served as director of the Glen Ellen Historical Society for 10 years and has a private practice as a counselor in Glen Ellen. For many years his monthly column, "Living Life Well," has appeared in the Kenwood Press, with commentary ranging from personal to social observations. He is a member of the Glen Ellen Writers Circle, and has a blog at jshere.substack.com, where his essays, stories, poetry, and photographs may be found.

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What I often remind families is that while the diagnosis helps guide us, it does not define the person.

Each individual experiences dementia in their own way. Their history, personality, and environment all shape how the condition unfolds. That is why care must be individualized — flexible enough to adapt as needs change, and thoughtful enough to meet the person where they are.

Understanding the type of dementia provides a framework. It helps explain what is happening and what to expect. But just as importantly, it allows families to respond with more clarity and confidence.

Because in the end, this is not just about identifying a condition.

It is about understanding a person — and providing the kind of care that honors who they are, every step of the way.

Raj Kalra, MD, is a board-certified physician and founder of Aroha Memory Care, a residential memory care community focused on lifestyle medicine and person-centered care for individuals living with dementia. Aroha is dedicated to creating a supportive, home-like environment where residents can thrive and families can find peace of mind. Visit www.arohamemorycare.com for more information or to schedule a tour.