



## Treatment of Alzheimer's is local growth industry

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The game is simple. An announcer reads a name from a clipboard. "Romulus and ...?"

"Remus," someone finishes.

"Tristan and ...?"

"Isolde," says an older woman with silver dangly earrings. The announcer continues. "Regis and ...?"

"Kathie Lee."

The game, meant to trigger memories, is also an attempt by Napa's Adult Day Services to delay the progression of dementia and Alzheimer's. The dozen or so seniors calling out names Friday afternoon are in the early stages of a disease that can last two decades.

This "mindboosters" program is an important activity in the Napa Valley where more than 3,000 people have Alzheimer's. With nearly a third of the county's population now older than 55, experts expect that number to double in the coming years.

With no cure for Alzheimer's in sight, it's easy for people to drag their feet getting treatment, said Celine Regalia, program director of Napa Valley Hospice and Adult Day Services.

"People think it's a normal part of the aging process," she said. "It's not."

According to the California Department of Public Health, Napa County averaged 73 Alzheimer's deaths a year from 2003 to 2005. Its age-adjusted death rate — 39.1 out of 100,000 — was the second highest in the state after Humboldt County.

This makes sense, Regalia said, when you consider that Napa also has the second highest proportion of residents aged 85 or older. About half of all adults get Alzheimer's by the time they reach 85.

The entrepreneurially minded in Napa have already taken note of this demographic shift. The number of caregiver agencies in Napa took off nearly a decade ago, said Elizabeth Mautner, coordinator of Napa's Long-term Care Ombudsman program.

"It used to be that we had two or three different agencies in town and then all of a sudden they just bloomed and everybody seemed to be getting in on the action," she said.

Aegis of Napa is one of several private facilities with specialized care available for Alzheimer's and dementia. A small wing in a larger nursing home, the memory care unit, as it's called, contains tiny, considered details that make life easier for the dozen patients who live there: big-band music playing in the hallways and wing-backed chairs are meant to evoke an era that some patients remember more strongly than the present.

A corner nursery houses a weighted baby doll for women whose minds harken back to their child-rearing days. A faux bus stop in the side garden waits for anyone anxious about missing what was once a daily ride to work.

But while options like Aegis exist for Napa seniors, not everyone can afford them. The cost of private nursing homes in Napa County averages about \$3,500 a month, Mautner said, while professional caregivers can charge between \$20 and \$30 an hour to visit a home.

The 14 beds in Aegis' memory care unit are currently full, but Mautner said many beds at Napa's private facilities stay empty because "a lot of people simply don't have that kind of money," she said. "Not everyone in Napa's wealthy."

In fact, seven percent of Napers older than 65 live below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Of Napa County's 40 or so residential care facilities, only two accept Medi-Cal, the state's health insurance program for the poor.

Those beds are full, Regalia said. So seniors with few financial resources have been forced to look out of the county. "When it comes to (nursing home) placement, if you're low-income, your options are pretty limited," she said.

The last two people Regalia helped in their search for affordable care moved to Marin and Sacramento, an option most try to avoid. "People want to live at home and want to stay in their communities."

Lawrence Decarmo, a 78-year-old Korean War vet and former bricklayer, spends his nights in a Napa nursing home, but prefers his time spent in another section of Adult Day Services, which caters to people with more advanced forms of dementia than the Mind Boosters Club. The constant exercises and group activities are a good option, he said, "for fellows like myself who don't remember things."

"It's an opportunity to get away from the boring people that I've been living with," he said. "This is the only outside I've got."

The non-profit provides daytime care to some 50 seniors, about 60 percent of whom are on Medi-Cal or Medicare. More than half have some form of dementia. And like many publicly funded organizations, the program risks elimination if the governor's proposed budget cuts go through.

Which will make matters even more difficult for the increasing number of Napa residents with Alzheimer's — and their families — looking for low-cost care.

"Somebody's going to have to fill the void, pick up the slack. I don't know," Mautner said. "I guess the idea is that we're going to have to go back to families taking care of their own and less government services, but I don't know if that's going to happen. More likely we'll see people under the bridge."

Under the bridge, or for Decarmo, just bored to tears.