

f Dementia focus

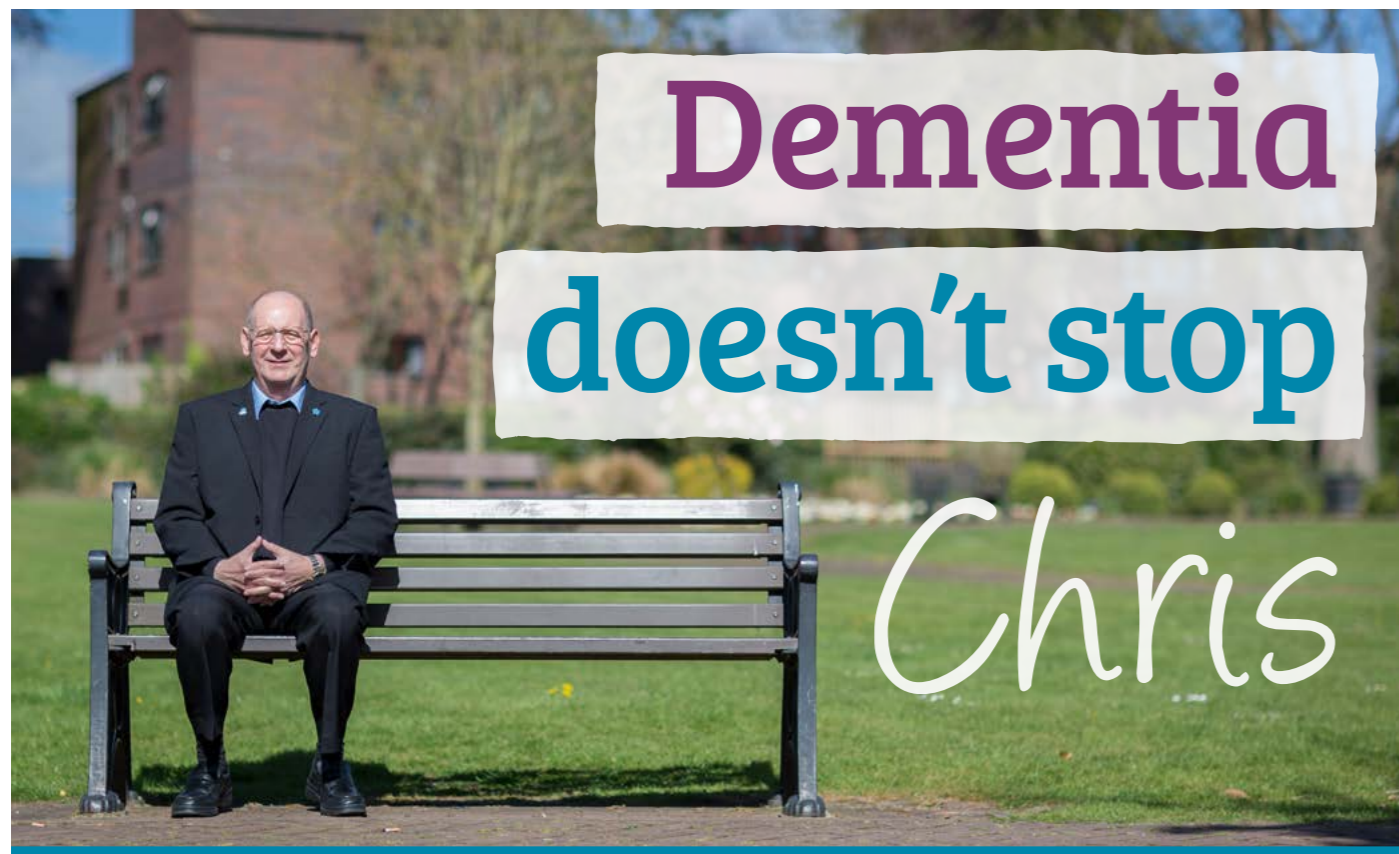


Caring for carers
More support is available

Being aware
Helping to understand dementia

The first step
to support

Dementia diagnosis rates increase in Kent



Ashford resident Chris Norris first noticed that he was experiencing problems with his perception of the world while working as a driving examiner.

The 60-year-old former Army musician says: "I was aware that I was finding it difficult to process the sequential order of driving test car journeys and placing events in their correct order.

"This became difficult when I had to write a report and de-brief the learner about what happened in the journey and its events."

In 2012 Chris went to see his GP, who referred him to a memory clinic, where he was diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia – a relatively unusual type of dementia that affects roughly 16,000 people in the UK.

"When I was diagnosed, there was almost a sense of relief," says Chris. "I felt that at last I knew what was wrong with me. Before my diagnosis, it was suggested that I could have depression, because the symptoms can sometimes be similar – but I knew that it wasn't that."

He adds: "Yes, there were mixed feelings, but whether you've been diagnosed or not, you're still the same person – that doesn't change."

Chris's philosophical outlook is shaped by his determination and a focus on what he can do, rather than what he can't.

He says: "I've developed coping strategies and my motto is to live life well – dementia doesn't stop me."

Married with two grown-up children, Chris may seem too young to have dementia, but frontotemporal dementia can often affect those under 65.

He had to take early retirement but still drives car (subject to an annual test) and still plays the tenor horn in a band.

"Reading music isn't as easy as it used to be," he reflects, "and these days I have to read each note, because recognising the patterns is difficult now, and this slows things up."

Chris also admits that conversations don't always flow as smoothly as

they used to – particularly if the conversational thread goes off on a tangent or quickly varies. Reading can be difficult and his dementia can also impact upon the way that he controls his emotions.

"I'm not Pollyanna [the always optimistic fictional character] and I can't ignore my dementia, but at the same time I have to live for the moment."

And for Chris, that has included an array of recent activities, including a helicopter flight over London and driving a Chieftain tank.

'My motto is to live life well'



He says: "Those experiences also help with my dementia because they give me clear memories."

But the most significant step that Chris has made has been to involve himself with Forget Me Nots (east Kent). This is a group of 20 people experiencing dementia who are active within Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust.

Those in the group speak to those newly diagnosed, help with staff recruitment and advise about service developments and patient information.

And The Forget Me Nots also help to spread the word about dementia at conferences and work with the Alzheimer's Society and other organisations.

"We've played a key role in a consultation organised by the House of Lords in connection with the Mental Health Act," he says. "And along with seven other members of

the group, I've contributed to a book, entitled, 'Welcome to our World', which tells our stories – both before and after a dementia diagnosis."

Talking to people about dementia, confronting the condition and demystifying dementia has helped Chris and others who he meets.

"I always refer to the phrase used by Winston Churchill, he says. "Never, never, never give up!"

'Welcome to our World' can be obtained from Waterstones book shop or the Alzheimer's Society.

Thinking of the family

Improved dementia diagnosis rates in Kent continue to make life better for those with dementia and their families.

Nationally, only around half of the 670,000 people with dementia in England receive a formal diagnosis – and this varies around the country. This can deny them the chance to understand what's happening and plan for the future.

NHS West Kent Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) clinical lead for mental health and dementia, Dr David Chesover, said: "Over the past six to nine months, GPs and the CCG team have been working incredibly hard to diagnose patients in the early stages of dementia."

"And because of these diagnoses, many people have been able to access treatment, and support has

been made available for families and carers."

Being a local GP, Dr Chesover has seen the benefits at first hand, with some patients gaining more independence and self-confidence as their condition has responded to treatment.

"I saw remarkable improvements in one patient and that was really wonderful – a very positive story. The patient was able to leave the house and travel alone again"

Even though Dr Chesover appreciates that the benefits of medical intervention can sometimes be variable – particularly with vascular dementia – there have been many success stories. And such improvements can help to remove some of the worry that families experience.

Dr Chesover is confident that as the emphasis on an accurate diagnosis continues, and dementia awareness is raised, patients and families will benefit.

He said: "Diagnosis can start the process of offering support to families. The onset of dementia can be very frightening for loved ones, particularly when they're faced with the prospect of someone they love not remembering who they are. But accessing the appropriate help and support can be invaluable."

