The Memory Assessment Center

Collaborative Initiative is First of Its Kind in U.S.

By: Roxanne Jones

Since 2007, residents of the Coachella Valley who are struggling with memory changes — and the people who love them —have been offered close-to-home access to the Memory Assessment Center (MAC). The Center offers a newly revised, first-of-its-kind program for diagnosing Alzheimer's disease, dementia or a related memory disorder, as well as a wealth of care and support resources tailored to their individual needs.

Co-Directors, Memory Assessment Center: Collin Liu, MD Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California and Sheda Heidarian, MD Eisenhower Medical Center

The Memory Assessment Center, under the operation of Eisenhower Medical Center and located in the Uihlein Building on the Eisenhower campus, is a collaboration between Eisenhower, the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California (USC) and the Alzheimer's Association®, California Southland Chapter, that provides a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to evaluation, care and support.

The Memory Assessment Center is led by Co-Directors Sheda Heidarian, MD and Collin Liu, MD. Dr. Heidarian, based at Eisenhower, is Board Certified in Internal Medicine and Geriatric Medicine, and fellowship-trained in geriatrics. Dr. Liu, who practices at USC in Los Angeles, is Board Certified in Neurology and Nuclear Medicine, and fellowship-trained in behavioral neurology and neuro-imaging. Both have extensive experience working with dementia patients and are committed to helping them and their families not only understand the disease but also navigate the challenges it presents.

How the Memory Assessment Center Works Patients are seen first by Dr. Heidarian for a thorough 90-minute to two-hour medical evaluation and geriatric assessment.

"This entails taking a complete medical history, conducting physical and neurological examinations, initial memory assessment testing, and mental status examinations," explains Dr. Heidarian. "I'll review any testing that's already been done, and order any other dementia work-up tests that are required, including lab work, MRI or other imaging studies, as well as neuropsychological testing."

Neuropsychological testing is conducted at the Memory Assessment Center by Roxanna Farinpour, PhD, who specializes in assessing the effects of brain injuries and illnesses on cognition and behavior to evaluate a person's functional capacity.

Once these tests are completed, the results are reviewed by both Drs. Heidarian and Liu. Then, using videoconferencing technology, Dr. Liu examines the patient from his office at USC. Two cameras are set up at the Memory Assessment Center so he can observe the patient writing, walking and performing tasks that are part of his evaluation, which takes about 90 minutes.

“Thanks to telemedicine, Dr. Liu can see the patient and conduct his own battery of tests from Los Angeles,” Dr. Heidarian says. “This is the only program of its kind in the entire country to use telemedicine to support multidisciplinary collaboration in this way.”

This comprehensive evaluation process takes approximately eight weeks. Drs. Heidarian and Liu discuss their test results and findings, and agree on a diagnosis. This information is then discussed at an in-person conference with the patient and family, led by Dr. Heidarian.

“We sit down and share what we found, our diagnosis and our recommendations regarding a care plan,” she says. “We also strive to educate the patient and family about what dementia is and the type of dementia the individual has. We involve them in the process versus just telling them ‘you have dementia.’”

“It makes patients and families more comfortable once they have a diagnosis and a care plan,” adds Dr. Heidarian. “Even when there’s just so much that can be done, since there’s no cure, they like to know what they’re dealing with.”

Also present at this conference is a master’s level care consultant from the Alzheimer’s Association, California Southland Chapter’s Coachella Valley Regional Office.

“My role in the family conference is to be there so if the diagnosis is Alzheimer’s disease or dementia, I can talk to the family about the resources available through the Alzheimer’s Association,” says care consultant Perry Wiggins. “A diagnosis like this is overwhelming enough, but I can help them know there are medical and other resources available for both the patient and caregivers. We’re really pleased to be partnering with Eisenhower and USC to offer this service,” he adds.

“As a chapter, we’re thrilled to be part of this,” affirms Susan Galeas, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Alzheimer’s Association, California Southland Chapter. “Eisenhower’s engagement in this is phenomenal, and our ongoing partnership with USC, Keck School of Medicine and Helena Chui, MD, Chair of the Neurology Department, remains an asset. This new concept would not have been possible without Dr. Chui’s vision and commitment to the MAC. Drs. Heidarian and Liu are wonderful physicians and genuinely care about the people who come into the Memory Assessment Center. It’s a wonderful partnership.”

Galeas points out that the Memory Assessment Center would not have been possible without the generosity of caring donors who understand all too well the benefit of having this type of program in the desert.

“Marshall Gelfand and The Judy Fund, Helene Galen, and Ann and Bob Byfield provided initial support,” she notes. “And their ongoing support allows the MAC to continue being a resource for the Coachella Valley community.”

Marshall Gelfand and his family established The Judy Fund in 2003 in memory of his wife, Judy Gelfand. The fund works to support the Alzheimer’s Association and to help prevent this disease from striking future generations.

“When my wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease 12 years ago, we had to go to Los Angeles for testing because at the time, there was no one in the Coachella Valley with this expertise,” Gelfand says about why he was motivated to support the Memory Assessment Center. “There was a real emotional aspect to having to travel, then getting the diagnosis on top of that. Setting up the Memory Assessment Center at Eisenhower is a good idea, and the new facility is terrific.”

“We hope it will serve as a model for other communities, especially the utilization of telemedicine since many rural areas don’t have geriatricians, neurologists or neuropsychologists,” Galeas adds. “It would allow for more accurate and timely diagnoses.”

“Ours is a very comprehensive approach,” Dr. Heidarian says, “and the reviews from patients and family members have been excellent. They feel they’re being listened to and involved in the entire process — not just being given a diagnosis but also an education. They feel good about having a team of doctors working together to make it possible.” She also notes that the Memory Assessment Center provides follow-up visits at six and 12 months after diagnosis.

“The daughter of one patient told us, ‘You treated my mom like a person,’” adds April Lopez, RN, Nurse Manager. “Sometimes it’s the little things that make all the difference, and we pay attention to those things.”

If you or someone you care about is experiencing memory problems (see sidebar) and would like to schedule an evaluation, or for more information, please call the Memory Assessment Center at 760-834-7964.

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