Mail Tribune
ASHLAND EDITION

Sleep apnea can lead to dementia diagnosis

By Ellen Waldman
August 8, 2017

"To sleep, perchance to dream" — or maybe to snore or even develop symptoms of dementia? Is this possible? Yes, as I learned recently at a seminar in Medford called the Alzheimer's and Dementia Conference. It featured presentations by Pat Gillette, M.D., Medical Director, Rogue Community Health; and Sarah Goodlin, MD., Chief of Geriatrics at the Portland Veterans Administration Medical Center and Associate Professor of Medicine at Oregon Health and Science University. Their combined expertise and information was excellent, as you might imagine. There are so many important things to know about this progressive disease, most of which is not full of good news. However, I found one amazing piece of information I wanted to pass along to you.

At this point, dementia has no real prevention, lasting treatment or cure. There is much research in the works, but so much more still needs to be done to address this serous and challenging disease. However, there is one type of dementia that is actually reversible. When checking medical histories of patients, if they discover that the person has sleep apnea, they can actually treat the apnea and the dementia will reverse itself. Wow, amazing. Good news for so many people who suffer what they think is a permanent and progressive disorder of their brains.

Here's some things to know about this. Dr. Goodlin first talked about sleep apnea and hypoxia. From the National Heart, Lung, Blood Institute: "Sleep apnea is a common disorder in which you have one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breaths while you sleep. Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to minutes. They may occur 30 times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound."

Hypoxia is a deficiency in the amount of oxygen reaching the tissues. The body, or a region of the body, in this case the brain, is deprived of adequate oxygen supply at the tissue level. You can imagine how sleep apnea and hypoxia could then come together to cause problems in thinking, memory and brain activities. These are known as executive functions. Additionally, she explained how two portions of the brain, the hippocampus and frontal lobes of the brain, actually lose volume; they shrink in size from sleep apnea.

Now the hopeful part of all this. These deficits in brain functions can be reversed by a treatment known as CPAP, Continuous Positive Airway Pressure. For our own local resources to treat this, we have the Asante Sleep Center in Medford (www.asante.org/services/sleep-center; 555 Black Oak Dr., Suite 230; 541-789-4320). If you, or a partner thinks you have a sleep disorder, with or without changes in cognition, the first step is a referral to Asante Physician Partners Pulmonary Consultants and Sleep Specialists at the number above. On their website is a simple sleep apnea risk questionnaire. Worth considering, especially if your sleep partner has reported to you that you have any of these symptoms.

After a sleep study, where you spend the night being tested, you will then get your results from their doctors. If this is your diagnosis, then you receive the CPAP treatment. Here is info from their website: One of the most common types of therapy for obstructive sleep apnea is Continuous Positive Airway

Pressure (CPAP). The CPAP device sends a gentle, steady stream of air through the nose and into the back of the throat. The pressure delivered by the device prevents the collapse and blockage of the airway allowing a person to breathe freely while asleep.

What both Dr. Gillette and Dr. Goodlin strongly urge is that anyone diagnosed with dementia with any sleep issues get tested for sleep apnea. Dr. Gillette told of a young man in his 30s who had a diagnosis of early onset cognitive impairment. When asked about his sleep history, he was found to snore, which might indicate sleep apnea. After being tested in a sleep lab, and fitted with a CPAP device, his symptoms of dementia have completely resolved. He is able to fully regain his life. Wonderful to know that for some people there is actually a reversal of this disease. If only this were so for all the other forms of dementia at this point. Until the cure, we can hope for more positive outcomes like this one.