

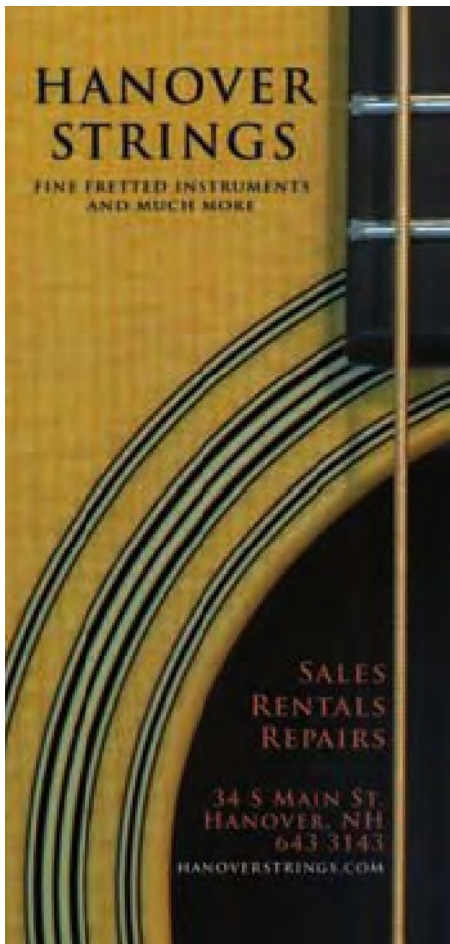
Providing Care Where There Is No Cure

DARTMOUTH'S ROBERT SANTULLI IS AN
AUTHORITY ON ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Robert Santulli, associate professor of psychiatry at Dartmouth Medical School and a specialist in the treatment of Alzheimer's patients, tries to impress upon his students the duality of his specialty field. "With new research, brain scans, and cutting-edge science, it is enormously high tech," Dr. Santulli says. At the same time, there is a more hands-on and low-tech side to the field. This relates to supporting families, talking to patients, and helping both to cope with the disease. It is with this lower-tech side that Dr. Santulli is most involved. »

"There is much we
can do in helping
people with this
disease cope."

—Dr. Robert Santulli



GOOD NEIGHBORS

Dr. Santulli's office at Dartmouth-Hitchcock is not a sterile doctor's office. On the walls are beautiful wooden bookshelves. His window is covered with living plants. On his table are about 15 photographs of his family—from his wife and kids to his uncle and grandparents to his dog. A graduate of Yale in psychology, he got his M.D. from Columbia and practiced privately for 12 years in New Jersey before coming to Dartmouth Medical School in 1990. In addition to his teaching and research responsibilities, he sees patients—mostly those suffering from memory loss—as director of the Dartmouth memory clinic. In some circles, psychiatrists might believe that having pictures like his in the space where he meets patients reveals too much. Dr. Santulli doesn't feel that this applies to the work he does in his office. "What I am conveying is that family is very important," he says.

A FAMILY DISEASE

If there is one thing Dr. Santulli has learned, it is how much Alzheimer's impacts families as well as patients. "How

well a family deals with it," says Dr. Santulli, "is directly related to how well patients do." Families and patients often need help to understand this major life crisis that is going to be with them for a long time, and this becomes Dr. Santulli's role. "Seeing their appreciation is very gratifying," he says.

Out of adversity sometimes comes a positive outcome. Despite the fact that there is no cure for Alzheimer's, he has seen family members—say a father and a son, for example—who didn't have the best relationship grow closer as a result of the ordeal. "I've seen grown children come back and really forge a new and better relationship with parents that becomes truly meaningful for the rest of their lives, even after the parent is gone," he says.

The way some families—spouses, children, uncles, and grandchildren—rally around Alzheimer's patients is nothing less than inspiring. "I am often impressed with how devoted people are," he says. This isn't always the case, of course. Alzheimer's is a terrible disease and a tragedy that is also capable of





breaking families apart. And Dr. Santulli has seen this, too.

CHALLENGES

Alzheimer's, a brain disease that affects memory, thinking, and behavior, is the most common form of dementia. With just five FDA-approved Alzheimer's drugs, treatments for the disease are only modestly effective. Furthermore,

the disease carries with it a certain stigma as divisive and damaging as any prejudice. There is a lack of education and understanding about the disease among the general public. And people actually suffering from memory loss and other effects of Alzheimer's often put off a consultation out of denial or fear of some of the implications a positive diagnosis might have on their lives—for example, that they

Dr. Santulli talks with a patient's family member.

Dr. Santulli speaks with staff at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Aging Resource Center.

might be forced out of their homes or be forbidden to drive. "Alzheimer's is relentlessly progressive," says Dr. Santulli. So with the fear of potential stigmas impeding timely diagnoses, by the time many patients see a specialist, their quality of life has already declined, and their further deterioration can be rapid.

One program Dr. Santulli initiated with medical students at Dartmouth is the pairing of students with Alzheimer's patients in the community. "Their purpose is not to 'doctor' them, but rather to get to know them as people," Dr. Santulli explains. One way to break down the stigma surrounding Alzheimer's is to get people to spend time with those who have the disease. Dr. Santulli also promotes a better understanding of the disease with a book that he edited, *The Dartmouth Memory Handbook*, a collection of informative write-ups that can help patients and families prepare for the ordeal of Alzheimer's.

Compiling the book was an effort and an accomplishment. However, Dr. Santulli is prouder of what he has been able to do with the book, thanks to the Jeanne Estee Mackay Anderson Alzheimer's Disease Support and Education Fund. The Anderson Fund, a gift from the widow of a former patient, supports Dr. Santulli's Alzheimer's work at Dartmouth-Hitchcock, and it allows him to provide and distribute the handbook free of charge to those who need it.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

With so many challenges facing care providers for Alzheimer's patients, one could imagine Dr. Santulli finding his work tedious—maybe even depressing. He does not. While he may not be able to cure his patients or even stabilize their condition

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GOOD NEIGHBORS

for more than a short while, he can make positive impacts in other ways. "I believe there is much we can do in helping people with the disease cope." In this, Dr. Santulli is a gifted and talented supporter.

Linda Wilkinson's husband Bob died of complications resulting from Alzheimer's in 2005. When Bob Wilkinson first visited Dr. Santulli, he was very anxious. He was not a patient in denial; rather, his anxiety stemmed from the fact that his own father had died of Alzheimer's, and he vividly remembered his father's experience. He shared this personal history with Dr. Santulli at their first meeting. Linda Wilkinson recalls what happened next. "Immediately, Dr. Santulli leaned forward," she says. "He put his hand on my husband's hand. He said, looking straight at my husband, 'Bob, you are not your father. And this is not your father's era.'" Instantly, Mrs. Wilkinson felt her husband relax. "In one short phrase, he helped my husband to separate himself from his fears," she says.

Dr. Santulli has a vast knowledge of his field, but his strength is his caring and open way with patients. "He was so skillful and sensitive with Bob," says Linda Wilkinson, "and extremely open to the needs of the family."

Linda Wilkinson is not the only one who feels this way. In 2009, Dr. Santulli was awarded the Alma Hass Milham Award, an annual award honoring a DHMC physician who best exemplifies "humane and ethical values in the practice of medicine." Dr. Santulli does not have a pill he can give Alzheimer's patients to make them better; nobody does. "I have always been interested in helping care for older people," he says. And Robert Santulli has positively impacted the experiences of patients and their families around the Upper Valley and beyond. 🍷

Dr. Santulli shares helpful tips for families and caregivers online at www.hereinhanoveronline.com.

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