

WDDTY Editorial

Alzheimer's / Wrong Path Wrong Remedy

Heard about amyloid plaques? Yes, they are the strange formations in the brain that medical researchers reckon cause Alzheimer's disease. Here's an easier one: you know about LDL cholesterol? It's described as the 'bad' cholesterol that is driving the heart disease epidemic.

These are the bad boys that have been fingered as the cause of two of the world's most lethal diseases. Billions upon billions of dollars have been spent on researching them, developing drugs to combat them and, in the case of LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol, launching the low-fats industry.

But—and here's a shocker to make you drop your toast—they're both innocent of any health crime against humanity. That's because both theories about the causes of Alzheimer's and heart disease are wrong and represent a road that should never have been travelled.

Back in 1906, psychiatrist Alois Alzheimer carried out an autopsy on a female colleague who had died after she had been behaving very erratically for years beforehand. He discovered strange plaque formations in her brain, and Alzheimer suspected these were responsible for her dementia-like behaviour. His colleague, Claire O'Brien, wasn't so convinced, and instead thought the patient had vascular dementing disease, caused by poor blood supply to the brain.

By dint of his rank, Alzheimer won the day, and researchers started to research the phenomenon. The theory has amplified over the years, and today the prevailing view is that Alzheimer's is the result of protein malfunctioning, and especially apolipoproteins E (ApoE) that carry cholesterol to the brain and help repair any injury. The plaques are clumps of the protein that form between nerve cells, affecting their healthy functioning. For the AD patient, this means a progressive loss of memory, language skills, general cognitive function, and motor abilities.

Drugs have been developed to combat the buildup of amyloid plaques, but none have had any positive effect. One great new hope, Aduhelm (aducanumab), was fast-tracked by America's drug regulator, the Food and Drug Administration, in 2021, but an application to market throughout Europe was withdrawn after studies failed to show it improved the lives of Alzheimer's patients—even though it was reducing the build-up of plaques made up of amyloid-beta proteins.

Something else is going on, and it's nothing to do with amyloid plaques. But then the same could be said of LDL cholesterol: despite the widespread use of cholesterol-lowering statins and the consumption of low-fat foods and drinks, heart disease stubbornly remains the major killer in the West.

Again, it's a case of the wrong path being chosen. In the 1970s, John Yudkin, founder of the nutrition department at the University of London's Queen Elizabeth College, was advocating the then controversial idea that sugar was behind the growing epidemic of heart disease, but the message didn't please the food industry,

which much preferred the idea, promulgated by American nutritionist Ancel Keys, that fats in our diet were to blame.

Yudkin lost his position and was 'uninvited' from speaking at conferences, and the fats theory became the dominant one—and it's wrong.

Taking the wrong path has blinded us from seeing that both diseases are linked, and their common cause is inflammation. LDL cholesterol is a repair mechanism that heals artery walls damaged by inflammation—itself caused by stress and a sugar-laden diet—and amyloid plaques could also be transport systems to repair brains that have been damaged by inflammation.

Stay safe and sane.

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Editors