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Commentary

Time is key in Alzheimer's research

By DR. RACHELLE DOODY

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Alzheimer's researchers are in a race against time to better diagnose, slow the progression, and ultimately prevent this increasingly prevalent disease that today affects an estimated 5.3 million people in the United States alone, including almost 340,000 Texans.

Adding to this sense of urgency are the severe financial and emotional challenges facing Alzheimer's patients and their families, not to mention the shortage of Alzheimer's clinical care options and community-based support services for caregivers.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who retired from the U.S. Supreme Court to care for her husband with Alzheimer's, addressed the Texas Senate recently and called for an intensive national push for an Alzheimer's breakthrough, similar to the intensive research focus that reined in the spread of polio and TB in the 1950s.

Justice O'Connor recognizes the great progress we have made and urged Texas to encourage other states to follow our lead in fast-tracking Alzheimer's research.

The Texas Alzheimer's Research Consortium now includes five of the state's major medical schools and health science centers in Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Lubbock and San Antonio.

In less than four years, the TARC has recruited almost 800 Texans to participate in Alzheimer's research studies. Volunteers undergo a thorough baseline evaluation and annual biomarker, genetic and psychometric examinations at a TARC institution.

Over the next two years, our consortium plans to take Alzheimer's research to the next level — launching a special research focus on the impact of Alzheimer's on Hispanics, the fastest-growing demographic group in Texas, and building on our capacity to identify blood biomarker and genetic links to Alzheimer's disease.

The TARC is already researching the relationship between Alzheimer's and cardiovascular disease, stroke, inflammation, diabetes and depression.

Hispanic communities across the country have been slow to participate in Alzheimer's research, even though their high incidence of diabetes and cardiovascular disease places them at high risk for dementia. There is evidence from other areas of the country that AD may even affect Hispanics at a younger average age.

By partnering with our newest TARC member, The University of Texas Health Sciences Center at San Antonio, we have a unique opportunity in Texas to do what no other state has done — recruit significant numbers of Hispanics into Alzheimer's research.

UTHSC-San Antonio intends to recruit from a large group of Mexican-American research volunteers whose risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease has been tracked for decades as part of the San Antonio Longitudinal Study on Aging (which has just ended) and the San Antonio Heart Study begun in 1979.

Our capacity to track the progression of AD over time is one of the TARC's greatest strengths. We want to learn the driving forces that cause some people to develop AD as they age, as well as the forces that drive the rate of progression once the disease is established.

Our analysis of the data we collect and centrally store in the Texas Alzheimer's databank could open the door to earlier therapies to delay onset and slow progression of Alzheimer's disease.

Already, we have identified a simpler, more accurate way to measure smaller incremental changes in people who are on the road to developing Alzheimer's, potentially making it possible to differentiate between mild cognitive impairment and very early Alzheimer's disease. This takes us one step closer to making the best in personalized medicine possible and is a necessary step toward the goal of developing prevention approaches.

Our special research focus on Hispanics will build on this momentum — creating an opportunity for Texas to lead the nation in an important area of Alzheimer's research.

Almost everyone knows someone whose life, including a lifetime of memories, has been unraveled by Alzheimer's disease. Investing in Alzheimer's research today can place Texas at the leading edge of finding new ways to delay and ultimately prevent Alzheimer's disease.

*Doody directs the Alzheimer's Disease and Memory Disorders Center and is the Effie Marie Cain chair in Alzheimer's Disease Research at Baylor College of Medicine. She serves on the steering committee of the **[Texas Alzheimer's Research Consortium](#)**.*