

Research Hits Home
Michael S. Wolfe, Ph.D.

EXCERPT

Over ten years ago, I began working on Alzheimer's disease. My colleagues and I went on to make important discoveries about the molecular basis of the disease, with implications for new therapeutics. These discoveries eventually brought me to Harvard, elicited international speaking engagements, and earned me a reputation as a leader in the field. Nevertheless, I seemed to be virtually the only person who did not personally know someone with the disease. And with 4.5 million Americans afflicted with Alzheimer's, including almost half of all people over age 85, the chances of not knowing at least one person with the disease was quite slim.

All that changed during the past year. My own father, at the relatively young age of 65, began to voice concerns about memory problems. A former police officer in New Jersey who took early retirement and moved to Florida, my father loved to tease me about the warm, sunny climate he enjoyed while I weathered the winters of New England. Finally away from the harsh winters and his difficult and often dangerous job in the Newark area, Dad was free to play softball and golf to his heart's content. For a while, I dismissed his concerns about his memory: we all forget where we put the car keys from time to time, but as we get older we tend to read more into these momentary lapses than is justified. Living in a retirement community and having a son working on Alzheimer's also may have overly sensitized him, I thought. He was still quite a young guy, and the odds of him having a real problem were extremely low. In fact, at his age the chances were only about 1 in 100.