

Moving towards more control of movement disorders

Coffee reduces the risk of dementia. This was the conclusion reached by a study published this month in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* – a study conducted over a period of two decades by researchers at the University of Kuopio in Finland and the Karolinska Institute in Sweden.

The research suggested three to five cups of coffee a day may have a protective effect, possibly due to the antioxidant content. Meanwhile, however, a separate study published recently by psychologists from Durham University in the UK showed a link between heavy coffee consumption and hallucinations. The role of diet in increasing or decreasing the risk of dementia (and indeed other medical conditions) clearly needs more investigation.

Remaining mentally alert, physically active, drinking in moderation and not smoking at all presently seem to be the best options to take. (Check out the Alzheimer's Australia website at www.alzheimers.org.au)

While dementia generally, and Alzheimer's disease specifically, attract a great deal of attention, we are probably somewhat less aware of another common neurological condition – Parkinson's disease (PD).

Parkinson's disease is a degenerative neurological condition – a disorder of the brain – that affects the control of body movements. It is both chronic and progressive. That is: chronic because it is long lasting and progressive because the symptoms get worse over time.

Just how many people in Australia are affected by PD is unknown, but estimates are upwards of 100,000, with over four million people affected worldwide.

It was first described as "paralysis agitans" by the English physician James Parkinson. Dr Parkinson, the son of a London apothecary, was also notable as a palaeontologist, geologist and political activist: however, the results of his study of rocks and fossils paled into insignificance compared with his *Essay on the Shaking Palsy* in 1817.

Sixty years after his astute observations, his own name was applied to the condition he so vividly recorded.

PD usually affects people over 50, with the average age for the initial onset of the disease being 60 years. But younger people can also be affected.

While PD is not life threatening, it is life altering. It has a significant impact on a person's ability to perform everyday tasks – their powers of perception, social functioning and ability to communicate. For the person with PD, there is almost an inevitable increase in dependence on carers.

It is still not known exactly what causes Parkinson's disease. In most cases it seems to develop for no obvious reason. Nevertheless, some risk factors have been identified.

Environmental toxins such as pesticides and herbicides are thought to increase the risk of PD, and repeated head trauma, as is likely to occur with what some people call the "sport" of boxing, is associated with increased risk.

Mohammad Ali, one of the most recognisable faces in the sporting world, fought a verbal battle with Michael Parkinson in an interview about 35 years ago; but for the last 25 years his fight has been with Parkinson's disease – almost certainly as a result of boxing-related trauma.

Canadian-born TV and film actor, Michael J Fox, is another to have given PD celebrity status when he disclosed that he had the disease in 1998. It had been diagnosed seven years earlier when he was just 30 years of age.

As well as tremor, the classical symptom of PD, other symptoms might include stiffness and rigidity of the muscles, slowness of movement, and poor balance and co-ordination.

A number of medicines are used to limit the severity of these symptoms; and physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy may also help. Dietary modification can assist too, particularly to enhance the effect of medicines or reduce the side effects. But, so far, no indication of benefit from coffee!

For more information on Parkinson's disease, visit your Self Care Pharmacy. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or visit the website www.psa.org.au for your nearest location.