

POETRY BREAKS THROUGH FOG OF ALZHEIMER'S SUFFERERS

'THERE IS A SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-ESTEEM'

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, UK: The teenager's voice breaks the silence that hangs over the dozing, grey-haired figures. "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you," she recites—"you'll be a man, my son", finishes one of the pensioners, with a burst of recognition. Alzheimer's has stolen most of Margaret's memories, but she can still remember the line from Rudyard Kipling's famous poem that she learnt years ago, a rare moment of clarity in the fog of the cruel disease.

This retirement home in central England is one of many institutions and hospitals across the country turning to poetry to provide some respite from the symptoms of dementia, such as the loss of memory, communication and basic skills.

While it provides no cure, the rhythm and pace of well-known verse can act as a trigger for memories and speech, according to Jill Fraser, whose charity "Kissing it Better" organizes reading sessions for the elderly. If patients "hear one word that they can remember from poetry, it brightens their day up," adds Elaine Gibbs, who runs the Hylands House retirement home in Stratford-upon-Avon-fittingly, the home of William Shakespeare.

Miriam Cowley, elegant in a flowered dress and her grey hair tied up into a bun, listens attentively as a teenager reads her "Daffodils" by William Wordsworth.

"I did know the poem but I've forgotten it. I learnt it when I was a kid at school, a long time ago," said the retired teacher, who suffers from short-term memory loss.

"It brings back good memories. I will have some good dreams after that, dreams of daffodils, of trees."

The home can be a somber place because of the prevalence of residents with Alzheimer's, dubbed 'the long good-bye' because of the way it slowly steals away everything that makes a person who they are.

But as a woman bashes a plate incessantly against a table at one end of the room, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings, one of the teenage volunteer readers says spending time there "gives you a real buzz". "You come in here and everyone is sitting there by themselves," says Hannah Ciotkowski, 15. Then when someone starts reading a poem aloud "you can immediately see life in them, they are smiling".

"It's wonderful when suddenly they join in with a line," adds Anita Wright, an 81-year-old former actress with the Royal Shakespeare Company who also reads poetry at Hylands. She recalls how one patient with advanced dementia broke down in tears when

she heard a poem about a man bidding farewell to his lover, and started recounting how her fiancé had died. "She had not said a single word since she had been to this home and the poem just broke open the dam," Wright said.

Lyn Darnley, head of voice at the RSC, says poetry can be very powerful. "These rhythms run deeply inside of us and poetry can touch and spark memories of not just emotions but the deep senses of language," she said.

Experts caution that poetry will not halt the onslaught of dementia, which affects 800,000 people in Britain. "Poetry does not cure dementia," says Dave Bell, a specialist



STRATFORD-UPON-AVON: A volunteer from the 'Kissing it Better' charity read poems to a resident of a retirement home in Stratford upon Avon who has been diagnosed with dementia. — AFP



STRATFORD-UPON-AVON: Jill Frasier, the co-founder of 'Kissing it Better' charity who read poems and recite songs to elderly patients who have been diagnosed with dementia, poses for a photograph. — AFP

nurse with Dementia UK, a charity which works to improve the quality of life for people affected by the disease. "But there is a sense of achievement and self-esteem for the person because they can remember something," he says, adding that it also helps them connect with other people. Fifteen-year-old Hannah is certainly convinced: "I hope that when I am old, people will come visit me, read to me and sing to me." — AFP

OBAMACARE WEBSITE FAILED TO HANDLE EVEN 500 USERS

WASHINGTON: In the last days before the botched Oct. 1 launch of President Barack Obama's healthcare website, the team in charge was seeing alarming results from performance tests, according to internal emails released by Republican lawmakers investigating the rollout. HealthCare.gov was unable to consistently handle 500 users at once in the testing, and tests failed with 2,000 users over a three-day period, according to a series of emails between members of the information technology team at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS.

"I do not want a repeat of what happened near the end of December 2005 where Medicare.Gov had a meltdown," Henry Chao, the website's project manager at CMS, wrote in capital letters in an urgent message on Sept. 26 to his team and contractors. Chao was referring to the disastrous launch of the Medicare Part D prescription drug program under President George W. Bush's administration. Technical woes prevented many seniors from initially gaining access to the website.

The emails, released by the Republican-led House Energy and Commerce Committee, are the latest to illustrate the depths of problems with the Obamacare website, which has frustrated millions of Americans with error messages and slow responses as they try to shop for health insurance.

The troubled rollout has been deeply embarrassing for Obama, who had promised up to the launch of the website that it would

make shopping for plans as easy as buying televisions on Amazon. It has also raised questions about the management of his signature healthcare reform program. White House spokesman Eric Schultz said the "cherry-picked" emails did not reveal anything new.

"To the extent that CMS had identified capacity issues, we of course sought assurances that they were getting addressed," Schultz said. "But, as is well-known, nobody anticipated the severity of the problems we experienced once the site launched."

In a statement, a CMS spokeswoman said the agency previously admitted it underestimated the volume of users who would try to log onto the system at the same time. "It is important to remember that these emails are one piece of a number of ongoing discussions up to the launch of HealthCare.gov on October 1," the statement said.

Obama has said his team would not have launched the site had it known how badly it would perform.

The emails show that behind the scenes, information technology officials were raising numerous concerns. On Sept 26, Chao said the site needed to be able to handle at least 10,000 or more users at a time. But three days of testing showed the system flopping at levels well below that.

"The results are not good and not consistent at all," wrote Akhtar Zaman, a system integrator at CMS, describing in detail the hang-ups and errors. — Reuters