Column: Provide resources for early Alzheimer's diagnoses, care

By Peter Black

March 5, 2026 Honolulu Star-Advertiser

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I live on the Hilo side of the Big Island. Years ago, my wife and I began to notice subtle changes in my behavior—forgetting events, struggling a bit more to think through tasks that once came easily. None of this was all that dramatic, but eventually it was enough to start asking questions.

That decision was one of the best I have ever made. It changed our life for the better.

When I received my diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, it was not the news we hoped for, but it turned out to be a gift.

Alzheimer's disease is a medical condition caused by the buildup in the brain of amyloid plaques and tau tangles, which damage brain cells over time. Up until recently, there was little anyone could do. Incredibly, that is no longer the case. There is still no cure, but today science has given us tools that change the course of the disease by delaying its worst manifestations when addressed proactively.

Because my Alzheimer's was identified while it was still in an early stage, I was able to seek specialist care with a neurologist on Oahu and begin treatment with lecanemab (Leqembi), which works to slow the progression of this awful disease.

That early diagnosis has given my wife and me something precious: time. Time with healthier cognition. Time to remain engaged in my life and my community. Time to spend with family and friends. Time to plan together for the future while my mind is still clear enough to do so. My diagnosis did change me but not in the ways people often assume. It changed how intentional I am about my health, my relationships, and how I spend each day.

I am deeply aware that my experience makes me an exception.

National Medicare data show that approximately 92% of older adults expected to have early cognitive impairment are never formally diagnosed, meaning most people never get the opportunity I was fortunate enough to have: to understand what is happening early and pursue treatment and planning.

That is not because people don't want to know. It is because our systems too often fail to recognize early cognitive changes. And hence, they do not offer the guidance and support people need at this point in their lives. Too many families are left to manage confusion and crisis instead of clarity and care.

That's why I speak out in support of the HANAI Memory Network (Senate Bill 2589 and House Bill 1853).

Endorsed by the Alzheimer's Association, HANAI is about making sure early diagnosis leads to support, not stigma. It creates a coordinated pathway so people across Hawaii and on every island can access memory evaluation, specialty care when needed and community resources, no matter where they live. It's about ensuring that early detection opens doors, without which people are left to navigate a confusing system on their own.

I was fortunate. I had the resources, the referrals and the timing to get diagnosed early and access treatment that is now changing how Alzheimer's is managed. Everyone deserves that chance.

An Alzheimer's diagnosis does not take your life away. When it comes early it can come as a blessing, giving you a better chance to continue living your life with more clarity, more choice and more time to do what you love and be with the people you love.

Hawaii has an opportunity to lead with compassion and evidence by investing in systems like the HANAI Memory Network.

My hope is simple: that my story becomes less exceptional and that early diagnosis and care become the rule, not the rare lucky break.

Peter Black, 83, is a retired anthropology professor living with Alzheimer's on Hawaii island's Hilo side with wife Barbara, his caretaker.