At the Bridge Table, Clues to a Lucid Old Age

By BENEDICT CAREY

LAGUNA WOODS, Calif. — The ladies in the card room are playing bridge, and at their age the game is no hobby. It is a way of life, a daily comfort and challenge, the last communal campfire before all goes dark.

“We play for blood,” says Ruth Cummins, 92, before taking a sip of Red Bull at a recent game.

“It’s what keeps us going,” adds Georgia Scott, 99. “It’s where our closest friends are.”

In recent years scientists have become intensely interested in what could be called a super memory club, the fewest under one in 200 of us alive today, like Ms. Scott and Ms. Cummins, have lived past 80 without a trace of dementia. It is a group that, for the first time, is large enough to provide a glimpse into the lucid brain at the furthest reach of human life, and to help researchers tease apart what, exactly, is essential in preserving mental sharpness to the end.

“Most of the most successful agers on earth, and they’re only just beginning to teach us what’s important, in their genes, in their routines, in their lives,” said Dr. Claudia Kawas, a neurologist at the University of California, Irvine. “What’s the example? For example, that it’s very important to use your brain, to keep challenging your mind, but not all mental activities may be equal. We’re seeing some evidence that a social component may be crucial.”

Laguna Woods, a sprawling retirement community of 20,000 south of Los Angeles, is at the center of the world’s largest decades-long study of health and mental acuity in the elderly. Begun by University of Southern California researchers in 1981 and called the 90+ Study, it has included more than 14,000 people aged 65 and older and more than 1,000 aged 80 or older.

Such studies can take years to bear fruit, and the results of this study are starting to alter the way scientists understand the aging brain. The evidence suggests that people who spend long stretches of their days, three hours and more, engrossed in some mental activities like cards may be at reduced risk of developing dementia. Researchers are trying to tease apart cause from effect: Are they active because they are sharp, or sharp because they are active?

The researchers have also demonstrated that the percentage of people with dementia after 90 does not plateau or taper off, as some experts had suspected. It continues to increase, so that for the one in 600 people who make it to age 95, nearly 40 percent of the men and 60 percent of the women qualify for a diagnosis of dementia.

At the same time, findings from this and other continuing research suggest that people who continue to live with their partners, who have social connections at work, who engage in physical activities, who play music, who play bridge, may be at reduced risk of dementia.

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studies of the very old have pro-
vided hints that some genes may help
people live even with brains that show all the brin-
gles of Alzheimer’s disease. In the 90+ Study, new
studies of the very old, the more than 400
residents’ clubs. They are as busy as running freshmen at a new
campus, with one large dif-
fERENCE: they are less interested in the future, or in the past.

“This is for the day,” said Dr. Leon Shapin, a longtime resi-
dent of Laguna Woods.

Yet it is precisely that ability to form new memories of the day, the present, that usually goes first in dementia cases, studies in Laguna Woods and elsewhere have shown.

The very old who live among their peers know this intimately, and their ability to engage their peers, their own laboratory. These are the people who are used to observing and having observational powers. They have the advantage of seeing people in different kinds of memory loss, and understanding the language that each, which can be confusing.

A Seat at the Table Here at Laguna Woods, many residents make such calculations in one place: the bridge table.

Contract bridge requires a strong memory. It involves four players, paired off, and each play-
er must read his or her partner’s strategy by closely following what is played. Good players re-
member every card played, any significance for the hand. You get a card, or fall behind, and it can cost the team — and the social connection — dearly.

“When a partner starts to slip, you can’t trust them,” said Julie Davis, 88, a regular player living in Laguna Woods. “That’s what it comes down to. It’s terrible to say it, but it is true.”

“Once you play that trick, they can’t do anything,” Ms. Cummins said. “You’re a trick behind.”

Most regular players at Laguna Wood’s 90+ Study bridge clubs, who have been paired in the regular game, a “friend of mine, a very good player, when she thought she couldn’t keep up, she automatically dropped out,” Ms. Cum-

The bridge is a different kind of challenge, but some residents swear that the camaraderie among players can play by instinct even when their memory is disordered.

“I know a man who’s 95, he’s sitting with dementia and playing bridge, and he forgets hands,” said Marilyn Barbier, who has played bridge for 40 years in Laguna Woods. “I bring him in as a partner anyway, and by the end we do exceedingly well. I don’t know how he does it, but he has lots of experience in the game.”

Scientists suspect that some people with deep experiences in a game like bridge may be able to draw on reserves of mental flexibility to fight against memory lapses. But there is not enough evidence one way or another.

Drawing the Line In studies of the very old, researchers have found clues to that good fortune. For instance, Dr. Knopman’s group has found that some people who are held until the end of the very long life have brains that appear washed with Alzheimer’s disease.

In a study released last month, the researchers report that many of the very old carry a gene variant called APOE, which may help them maintain mental sharpness.

Dr. Nir Barzilai of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine has found that Indian Ashkenazi Jews, who carry an increased likelihood for a gene called CEP7, which appears to increase the size and amount of so-called bad cholesterol particles, than peers who succumbed to dementia.

“Don’t know how this could be protective, but it’s very strongly correlated with good cognitive function at this level,” Dr. Barzilai said. “And at least it gives us a target for future treatments.”

For them in the apoE-negative

with their partners, who have social connections at work, who engage in physical activities, who play music, who play bridge, may be at reduced risk of dementia.

“The first thing you always want to do is in turn and help them,” Ms. Davis said. “But after a while you end up asking yourself: ‘What are we doing here? Am I even using my brain? You have to de-
code how far you’re going, when you have your own life to live.”

And so, in a high school, it is all but impossible to take back an invitation to the party. Some people decide to break up their game at least for a time, only to reform it with another player. Or, they might suggest that a player drop down a level, from a serious game to a more casual one. No player can stand to hear that. Every day in card rooms around the world, some hand is dealt that brings players to tears.

“Don’t play with them, please,” Ms. Cummins said. “You’re not cruel. You’re just busy.”

The rhythm of bidding and taking tricks, the easy way of saying “good game,” the daily game of giving and taking, almost a century, even for the humble in the generic lottery, a finally ends.

“People stop playing,” said Norma Koskoff, another regular player here, “and very often when they stop playing, they don’t live much longer.”