

Making Brain Gains in Memory-loss Battle

By Claude Solvik, *Long Island Business News*, December 3, 2013



With drugs showing only limited effectiveness in the battle against memory-distorting disorders like Alzheimer's disease, the use of mental exercises to promote brain functions is expanding – and so is the brain-reinforcement business.

Companies utilizing everything from provider-based interactions to computer programs stimulating brain activity are rolling out a plethora of new services, often at assisted- and independent-living facilities.

The idea is to help patients in the early stages of memory loss remain independent longer without the use of medications, which not only avoids sometimes-deleterious side effects but can reduce the cost of health care overall.

Such treatments are catching on among a drug-wary, financially challenged populous, especially as new techniques prove effective.

Forest Hills-based Memory Training Centers of America, which uses both clinicians and computers to engage patients' minds, has grown from \$115,000 in revenues in 2003 to \$4.8 million this year.

It now provides services in 110 facilities – mostly assisted-living chains – in seven states, including 17 on Long Island. As recently as last year, the company serviced patients in only 60 locations.

There's no doubt non-medicinal memory services are catching on, according to Fred Jenny, executive director of the Port Washington-based Long Island Alzheimer's Foundation.

"You're seeing an uptick in the number of places where it's being provided," Jenny said. "There's a greater awareness than in the past."

The economics are simple: Keeping the mind healthier longer, through brain games and personal therapies, costs less than the typical nursing home bed, which on Long Island runs about \$144,000 a year.

"If you delay one year of nursing home placement, it can be huge," Jenny said. "Anything you can do to delay someone being placed in a nursing home has tremendous cost savings."

In addition to for-profit companies like Memory Training Centers, nonprofits are making memory-improvement inroads, too.

The Long Island Alzheimer's Foundation provides brain-training classes at libraries, senior centers and its offices, and while they aren't free – the foundation charges between \$50 and \$100 per class to cover expenses – ultimately they're much less expensive than a nursing home.

But commercial opportunities in this field are still rising fast. Many of Atria's Long Island-based assisted-living facilities, and others including the Arbors in Westbury and Sunrise in Smithtown, have signed deals with Memory Training Centers, which is also nearing agreements with assisted-living managers Emeritus, Brookdale and Arden Court.

All told, the company plans to expand into 500 additional sites over the next two years, Executive Vice President Stephen Swartz said.

"It's a benefit to the community," Swartz said. "You're helping the community provide a more active,

independent resident base.”

Helping the company along is the fact that assisted-living communities aren’t usually charged for the brain-game services, which are typically covered by Medicare for the 65-and-older population.

“We customize a treatment plan for each individual,” said Bruce Brotter, director of training for Memory Training Centers. “Not only can we improve cognitive functioning, we can help forestall regression.

While Memory Training Centers uses psychologists and mental-health clinicians to work directly with residents in twice-weekly 45-minute sessions, others in the field – including Israel-based CogniFit and San Francisco-based Lumosity – achieve similar results through software.

These two schools of thought on memory enhancement – personal interaction versus computer programs – are not mutually exclusive. Jenny, for one, draws comparisons to learning a foreign language.

“It would be like if you wanted to learn French,” he said. “Would you learn better using a computer, or an individual and a computer? Everybody’s got different strengths.”

However the individual patient responds, recent studies reinforce the benefits of brain-training techniques, as opposed to staving off memory loss with drugs alone. A National Institutes of Health study in 2010 concluded that keeping the brain active through brain games correlated with decreased risk of cognitive decline.

“A lot of people don’t like to rely on drugs,” Jenny added. “They look for a more natural solution, not a pharmacological solution.”

While brain-training is not the cure-all for every memory problem, insiders cite better results among patients suffering mild cognitive difficulties, such as forgetting names and appointments. But after decades of championing heart-healthy exercise, more health-care professionals are getting behind the wisdom of working out the mind.

“To a certain extent,” Swartz said, “we’re 30 years behind with the brain.”