

As calls to Alzheimer's Society soar 60% after Christmas family get-togethers...

By Rachel Ellis

Richard Madeley: My mum's dementia battle – and the danger signs you must never ignore

IT WAS, Richard Madeley says, an almost offhand remark 'all massively flammed-up', in a subsequent media furor. Still, the admission that the presenter and his co-host wife Judy Finnigan – famous for sharing some of their most intimate health issues, from his vasectomy and Viagra use to her battle with sight loss after cataract surgery – had made a suicide pact, should either of them fall seriously ill, was startling.

The comments, made during a newspaper interview in 2014, came in the wake of grief after Richard's mother's death from lung cancer, which she had battled for three years alongside rapidly deteriorating dementia.

Pondering on whether he would be willing to give his wife 'a little push' should the dreadful time come, he said: 'I wouldn't give a tuppenny f*** if there was a risk of being prosecuted. I'd do what was right for my wife. For me it would be a locked room, a bottle of whisky and the revolver. I wouldn't want to mess around.'

The anti-euthanasia lobby were appalled.

Today though, two years on and as a backer of a new dementia charity drive, Richard's stance has mellowed somewhat.

Richard, 59, father of Chloe, 28, and Jack, 29, is talking about his mother's battle with ill-health for the first time since giving his support to the Alzheimer's Society charity and the Dementia Action Alliance – which brings together Government departments, charities, care providers and others to make life better for people with the disease.

His mother Mary Claire was 79 in the summer of 2011 when she was given her devastating dual diagnosis. The lung cancer was advanced, and terminal.

'She took it on the chin, joking that only she could get two diagnoses in one day,' says the chat-show star.

The dementia, he believes, was about 'halfway down the track' when she died, so she was spared the full horror of the disease. 'It was a sort of blessing,' he says.

Though Richard doesn't live in fear of dementia – genes are thought to play a role – he does keep in good shape to ward off ill-health.

He says: 'If it happens to me, I would want to meet it head on. I'd want to go down fighting.'

'Following my mother's death, I've learned a dementia diagnosis isn't normally an instant death sentence. With the right therapies and stimulation, it can be managed very successfully for a long time.'

On Boxing Day the Alzheimer's Society launched a campaign urging people to seek help if they were concerned about changes in loved ones that could be signs of dementia.

Calls to the charity's helpline soared by 60 per cent after the festive period last year.

Sociable, with a sharp mind and quick humour, Canadian-born Mary Claire married three times. Her first husband was Richard's father.

She lived alone after her third husband died but was in excellent health – until five years ago at Christmas. Richard recalls: 'My sister Elizabeth mentioned brandy butter to Mum, which she always made at Christmas – it was one of

CHERISHED MEMORIES: Richard as a boy with his mother in the 1960s. Inset below: With wife and TV partner Judy Finnigan



what she went for. At the same time, she'd also developed a persistent cough.' It was soon after this that Mary Claire received her diagnoses. While she had several rounds of radiotherapy for the lung cancer, initially it was just a case of managing the symptoms for the dementia. 'She'd write notes to remind her where her keys were, for example,' says Richard. 'She didn't want someone living with her, and seemed to function well for the next nine months.'

BUT then she began to wander off at odd times, and forget to eat. Eventually it was decided Mary Claire, who lived in Norfolk, would go into a care home just outside Norwich. 'She had her own room with some of her favourite things around her and lived in considerable contentment for the next year. She accepted dementia – it didn't seem to frighten her. Judy came with me to visit and the children came too sometimes to begin with, but it soon became quite distressing for them as she had completely forgotten who they were.'

For the final six months, she no longer knew who Richard was.

The last time he took his mother out for lunch was at Christmas two years ago. He says: 'When I picked her up, she was all made-up, looking smart with her pearls on and we went to a hotel. We talked about the past, her childhood in Canada and emigrating to the UK in the 1950s.' However, by March 2014, the cancer was overwhelming and she was very frail.

'Amazingly, in those last two or three days, I became Richard again. She knew me. It was like a gift. She knew she

was dying, but wasn't frightened. 'The last time I saw her, she blew me a kiss – and then fell back asleep again. It was the perfect farewell.'

● More information at alzheimers.org.uk.

her specialties. But that year she didn't know what it was. Then in the evening, as we were settling down to watch TV, she just couldn't sit still. She was charging around the house, agitated, anxious and over-excited.' Signs of dementia include

repeatedly forgetting names of family members and common objects, and confusion around the order of everyday tasks, such as how to make a cup of tea.

Other signs are repeated use of the same gestures or phrases, ask-

ing the same question several times, and stuttering or mispronouncing words. Richard and Elizabeth began to monitor their mother's behaviour.

'We both felt a faint sense of dread. She would go shopping and forget

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WHAT ARE THE TONSILS FOR?

Dr Auldric Ratajczak, Nuffield Health deputy medical director for wellbeing, says: 'The tonsils are a key part of our immune system,

fighting germs that enter the body through the mouth and isolating infection. Because the immune response works well without tonsils, it was felt that they could be removed

at an early age to avoid tonsillitis. It's now thought that the risks of surgery were underestimated and should really be discussed on a case-by-case basis.'