

MICHELLE PEMBERTON / THE STAR

Nuclear medicine technologist Jody Ramos told patient Anna "Jerry" York how the Alzheimer's test was going to work.

DETECTING ALZHEIMER'S

New test provides another way to find signs of the disease

By Shari Rudavsky
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All the signs pointed to Alzheimer's disease. Recently, Anna "Jerry" York has been unable to finish sentences when writing letters. Sometimes the 87-year-old Brownsburg woman writes a number where a letter should be. On occasion, she's picked up a book she's just finished reading and started it anew.

Her doctor diagnosed her with Alzheimer's disease. Her daughter Debbie Hamstra, with whom she lives, agreed. Even York suspected it.

But she just wasn't sure.

On Friday, she became the first person in the Midwest and among the first in the nation to undergo a new diagnostic test produced by Eli Lilly and Co. that provides another piece of evidence that a person has the degenerative neurological disorder.



York became the first patient in the Midwest to undergo the test, which is produced by Eli Lilly and Co.

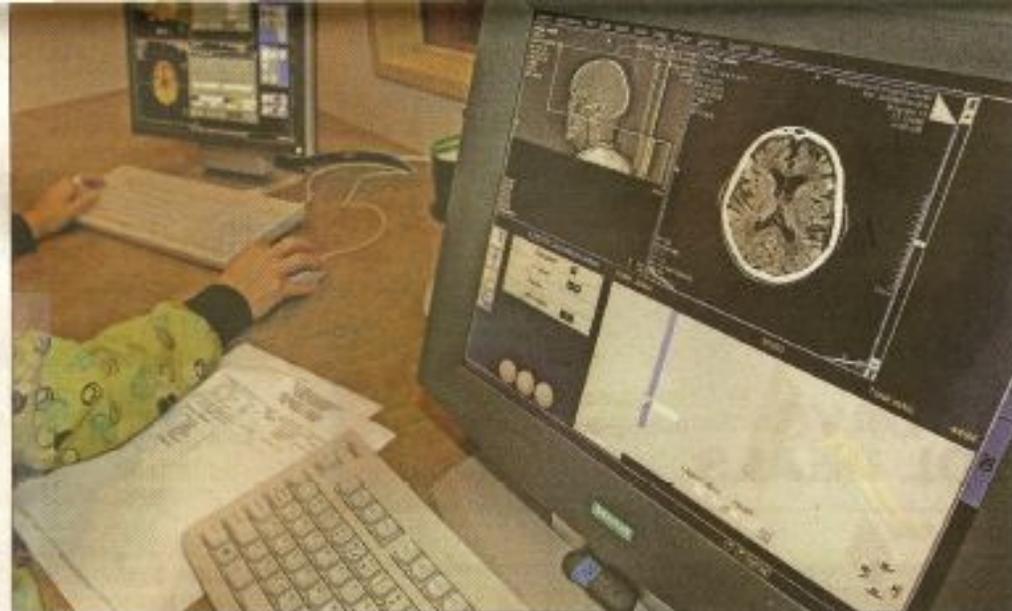
The radioactive injection, approved by the Food and Drug Administration in April, allows doctors for the first time to see the signs of Alzheimer's on a scan. Amyvid lights up the beta-amyloid plaques that

» See TEST, Page A7



INSIDE: ALZHEIMER'S CAN'T KEEP SINGER OFF STAGE

Glen Campbell will appear with his children Sunday at a concert in Indianapolis. A2



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The new test uses PET-CT scans to look for the beta-amyloid plaques that doctors have identified as being a contributor to Alzheimer's.

Test

Continued from A1

doctors have identified as being a contributor to Alzheimer's.

Until now, these plaques could have been seen only in an autopsy.

"It's a tool that we never had before," said Dr. Vincent Mathews, a neuroradiologist with Northwest Radiology, which is partnering with JWM Neurology to offer the test in Central Indiana. "It's the first time that we've had a way to look at the plaques involved with the pathology of the disease."

But some doctors and people who work with Alzheimer's patients say the test won't revolutionize treatment.

A positive scan that reveals plaques does not definitively prove that a person has Alzheimer's but adds to that likelihood. A negative scan does not mean a person will never develop Alzheimer's, but it suggests the patient's cognitive problems do not stem from the disease.

"It doesn't rule it in so much as rule it out," said Dr. Sri Jatla, a neurologist with JWM Neurology, where York's neurologist works. "If you know it's not Alzheimer's, you might go looking for other things."

Physical exams combined with extensive conversations and tests will continue to lock in most Alzheimer's diagnoses, said Dr. Malaz Boustani, director of the Healthy Aging Brain Center at Wishard Health Services.

The additional 1 percent or 2 percent of certainty that Amyvid adds will not change treatment or prognoses, he said.

Only about 10 percent of his patients — those who doubt they have the disease or whose family members doubt it — might benefit from the test.

"Those people who want a more concrete objective test, then Amyvid will help in this group," said Boustani, also a scientist at the Regenstrief Institute and associate

professor of medicine at the Indiana University School of Medicine.

But the information comes at a cost. Medicare and most private insurers do not yet cover the test. Those who want it now will pay \$3,500 to \$4,000 out of pocket at Northwest Radiology.

Nor does everyone want to know. Five years ago, Michael Hatke's family and his employer started to notice that something about him was off. His son Jason saw a film about Alzheimer's in his sixth-grade class and came home and told his mom. "I think Dad has Alzheimer's." Rita Hatke laughed it off.

A few months later, Michael's boss approached her with concerns about his memory loss. Two years of tests and doctor's appointments followed. At 46, Michael Hatke was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Three years later, Rita doesn't think Michael — who lives at home but can no longer work — would have wanted the test had it been available.

"It's scary. When you get the diagnosis that it's Alzheimer's, you know what the outcome is: There's no cure," she said.

Jason, the Lebanon couple's only child, fears that genetics will lead him, too, to develop the disease at some point in his life.

At this point — when there's little the 16-year-old could do to stave off the disease — he has no interest in the test. He plans to join the military and worries how a positive result might affect future insurers.

"If I were to do the test and I show up positive, the way Alzheimer's is now, it's a death sentence," Jason said. "Why should I find out if I can't do anything about it?"

That could change in the future if researchers develop drugs to treat Alzheimer's or medicines that target the beta-amyloid plaques, experts say.

But for now, the test may help some families think about long-term planning, said Linda Altmeyer, a program director at the Alzheimer's

Association. Others may find it the incentive they need to start exploring clinical trials to stave off the disease's progression and turn to the association for support and information.

Still, Altmeyer said, the test is not for everyone.

"I don't know. I think it will be split. There's the people that want to know and the people that don't want to know," she said. "I think it's going to be very useful if you're a need-to-know person."

In some cases, it could truncate months of testing and medical appointments.

When Art Wachholz's wife, Heather, showed signs of forgetfulness and memory loss four years ago, they spent nine traumatic months trying to find out what was wrong. Doctors considered anxiety, menopause, depression and a brain tumor before she was finally diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's.

Once they found out, they entered Heather, now 57, in a clinical trial to try to slow the disease.

"The sooner you know, the better," said Wachholz, Carmel. "Being part of that process gives you some degree of hope."

For York, having the test done was more about helping others than herself. As one of the first people to have the test, she knows others will be able to learn from her experience.

As the business day came to an end Friday, Dr. Mathews sat in a darkened room in his Carmel offices, peering at the inside of York's brain on a PET-CT (positron emission tomography-computed tomography) scan. He conferred briefly with Dr. Jatla, who then sat down privately with York and Hamstra.

The scan was clearly positive, confirming what all had suspected.

York said afterward that her reaction surprised even herself.

"It was hard to hear it reaffirmed," she said, "because you always have that 'maybe.'"

★ Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354.