

Bruce Willis diagnosis brings aphasia to forefront: Westman group

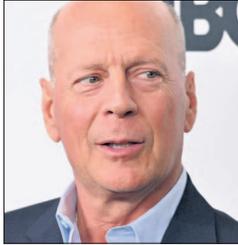
BY KAREN MCKINLEY

Following last month's announcement that Bruce Willis will retire from acting after being diagnosed with aphasia, the disorder was put under the spotlight and with it a stream of misinformation, says one Brandon organization.

Westman Aphasia is now looking to spur dialogue around the condition and assist families by showing them how they can manage and adapt to it.

The non-profit organization has been helping people and their families in Westman learn about the disorder.

After Willis went public with his diagnosis, there was more traffic on Westman Aphasia's website and social media, but that has since dissipated, said Susan Cable, volunteer chief administrative officer and



Bruce Willis

board chair.

The organization wants people to know it is available to help anyone who needs it.

"A diagnosis like this can be devastating, but there is hope and people can live a good life," Cable said. "People may not know how to cope. If we can find them through referrals or coverage, they can find us and help them."

One of the main messages they want to spread is that this isn't a cognitive or intellectual disorder. Aphasia is a breakdown of a person's ability to communicate with words. They lose the ability to comprehend, speak, write and read.

Willis' family did not reveal exactly what caused his aphasia, but Cable said about one-third of all people who have aphasia have suffered a stroke.

Other causes are dementia, Alzheimer's disease, brain tumours and injuries caused by blows to the head.

Communication skills can improve over time if the aphasia is caused by a stroke, but with progressive conditions like dementia, those skills deteriorate irreversibly.

There are many people out there who have it and may not know it and may not know there is an organization dedi-

cated solely to aphasia, Cable said.

The organization is the only one in the Westman region that provides services and support for people with aphasia and their caregivers. They have support groups and programs, courses in communication and information on what aphasia is. They help people work on managing the disorder and develop communication techniques to use with the public and between caregivers and loved ones.

For example, Cable said they may use a whiteboard or paper to draw a picture or write down one or two words to show people. This can help the person with aphasia get a message across. They can also try to memorize one or two words to make communicating more efficient if they have to talk to someone directly, such as run-

ning errands and asking a business' staff for help.

Cable said they are thankful to Willis and his family for talking about this because it does help get the word out, stressing they are not capitalizing on his disorder. Often it takes a tragedy happening to someone in the public eye to bring attention to whatever that person is dealing with.

This deterioration of language skills can be frustrating for both the person and the people around them. People with aphasia and the people caring for them need to learn how to develop a communication system, Cable said.

Most of their clients come to them through referrals or followups from presentations. They also reach people indirectly through just talking publicly about aphasia.

It's a frustrating disorder to

deal with, Cable said, especially when considering how important communication and socializing is in everyday life. Those who are having trouble managing it are often isolated. The pandemic made it worse with people being made to stay in their homes and relying on others to help them.

The pandemic also hurt the organization. As a non-profit, they operate mostly with volunteers and donations. The United Way has been helpful, Cable said, but they are looking for more people to be a part of the organization.

Additional information about Westman Aphasia is available on the organization's Facebook page and at Westmanaphasia.ca, or email at westmanaphasia@gmail.com to learn more.

» kmckinley@brandonsun.com
» Twitter: @karenleighbmckil