

OPINION

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Wanted: A piece of your mind

Dreams die hard. But there are more painful deaths.

Howard and Jean McFann dreamed of cruising the Caribbean. Several years ago, the New Jersey couple bought a 42-foot sailboat and began their odyssey. They got as far as West Palm Beach. Jean, suffering from Parkinson's disease, couldn't continue, and they sold the boat.

The dream was dead. So, in a few years, was Jean, at 63.



FRAN HATHAWAY

"My wife showed symptoms five years before her death," says Mr. McFann, who now lives in North Palm Beach. "But we had no idea how fast it would progress. Two years before her death, we decided we had to do something to help solve this riddle. So we signed up." The McFanns agreed to donate their brains after death to the University of Miami Brain Endowment Bank.

Today, with organ transplantation increasingly common, most people don't blanch at the thought of donating a liver or heart or cornea — especially to help another live or see. Brains, however, are not used for transplantation but for research, so brain donation is not common. And while researchers at the Miami bank receive 3-5

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brains every month, they could use more. Healthy as well as diseased brains are needed.

The study of the brain, called neuroscience, is only about 15 years old. Yet scientists believe cures for some brain diseases and methods of preventing others will be found before the turn of the century.

Such breakthroughs can't come soon enough for people who suffer from Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, manic-depression and movement disorders such as Huntington's disease and Tourette's syndrome. They and their families are leading this charge, and it's often a lonely crusade.

Important as the research is, it's hard to raise money for it — especially compared to causes such as cancer and heart disease. In part, such reticence reflects the stigma that is still attached to mental illness and the relatively recent understanding of illnesses such as Alzheimer's. It also may be because people still view the brain differently from other organs — as the seat of the soul, for instance.

Yet brain diseases affect people of all ages and can be as crippling — and lethal — as any other.

The brain suffering from Alzheimer's, which is the fourth-leading cause of death in the United States, loses mental functioning and wastes away. In schizophrenia, a severe emotional disturbance that develops in the late teens and early 20s, the brain is plagued by hallucinations and delusions. The brain afflicted with Parkinson's loses a chemical called dopamine, and the loss causes tremors and rigid muscles. Eventually, a person is totally incapacitated. Howard McFann knows that only too well. For the last two years of his wife's life, caring for her was a full-time job.

The 4-year-old University of Miami Brain Endowment Bank serves all of Florida and is one of only a handful of such banks in the nation. Coordinator Trudy Skoke has the sensitive task of arranging for brain removal. She's the one who gets the call from a relative when a donor dies and arranges for the body to be brought immediately to Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital. After the brain is removed, the body is returned. All costs are paid by the University of Miami School of Medicine. The procedure does not delay or interfere with a family's desires for a funeral or open casket. For donors north of Palm Beach County, pathologists work with the bank to remove a brain, freeze it and send it to Miami within 12 hours of death.

The 1990s have been dubbed the Decade of the Brain. And come the millennium, perhaps such illnesses will be under control. But that will depend on public recognition of their severity — and on the generosity of people like the McFanns, who "sign up."