

# Seeing Beyond The Diagnosis: Reflections As A Geriatrician And Researcher

Alicia Lu

*National Centre for Healthy Ageing, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia*

Before my PhD, I thought I understood dementia. My training as a geriatrician had been shaped by countless conversations with people with dementia and their families. I knew how to ask the right questions and keep discussions focused and efficient, and I approached research interviews with quiet confidence.

Yet unexpectedly, these interviews ran the longest. Longer conversations meant more transcription, coding, and pressure on an already tight PhD timeline. And so I resolved to stick tighter to the interview schedule, even if it meant cutting people short.

That resolve dissolved almost immediately.

I sat with a woman who had cared for her late husband with dementia, absorbed as she detailed his vivacious, humorous personality and the exhaustion of navigating a fragmented diagnostic process. Tears welled as she spoke of a grief that started long before his physical death. I watched the time pass, acutely aware that this was 'not on the interview schedule.' Yet I could not bring myself to interrupt her.

This happened repeatedly. Caregivers spoke of years spent searching for answers, and of walking kilometres to find a wandering spouse. People with dementia spoke of losing parts of themselves, and of navigating systems not designed to be kind to them. I felt unsettled as emotions surfaced that I rarely allowed myself to feel.

What disturbed me most was realising that I had never truly listened like this. I had always considered myself compassionate, an advocate for people with dementia. But medicine had trained me to see them through a framework of symptoms and function - a necessary lens, but a narrowing one. Outside the constraints of clinical time pressures and checklists, I was forced to confront how much of their experience I had learned to bracket off.

These reflections may not sit neatly within my PhD thesis, yet they represent my most profound growth. Though ever-busier clinical settings forbid me from shedding my medical lens, it now carries a deeper tint of understanding - one that reminds me to pause, listen, and hold space for lives far richer and more complex than our systems allow us to acknowledge.