

A Sure Bet:
The Multiple Sclerosis Association of America
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Horse-betting once captivated local attention at the Garden State Race Track. And if you've driven down Haddonfield Road lately, you can't help but gawk at the increasingly common sight of restaurant chains, swanky boutiques, and luxury housing complexes sprouting on the historic grounds. With all the change catching our attention, it is far too simple to overlook establishments that have been long-time fixtures in our region.

The once prosperous track has become a regional memory, but across the street stands another significant local, and national, landmark. And unless you are looking for it, or have a personal connection, you probably drive from Route 70 to the Cherry Hill Mall or Route 38 to the new shops cornering Route 70 and Haddonfield Road, failing to notice a two-story tan building on the opposite side of the road.

Since 1970, the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America's local headquarters has been right in South Jersey's backyard. Although horse racing is no longer in its heyday and the sight of local tracks is dwindling, the number of adults diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is increasing across the country at a staggering rate. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, or NINDS, with more than 400,000 Americans diagnosed and 10,400 new cases each year, chances are high you know someone affected by or with MS.

MS is the most common neurological disorder diagnosed in young adults. Patients are typically diagnosed between 15 and 60 years old. But, most patients experience their first symptoms between the ages of 20-40 years old. The commonly reported first

symptom is numbness in the fingers, legs and/or toes, or a “pins and needles” sensation. However, because of the multiple factors responsible for developing multiple sclerosis, as well as the various first symptoms which trigger patients to seek medical attention, it is extremely difficult to become diagnosed.

The physical symptoms of multiple sclerosis leave individuals frustrated because they can no longer perform simple day-to-day tasks without complications. For example, the “pins and needles” sensation makes counting money, opening a jar, or safely walking up and down steps difficult. Vertigo, or dizziness, causes individuals to sway or walk into doorways and walls. Visual impairments, pulsating nerves around the eyes or blind spots, come and go for many individuals, and for many others, it sadly leads to blindness. Battling a sampling of adversities and knowing that one day they might have to walk with a cane, be in a wheel chair, or possibly lose all mobility, instills fear—so much fear that people with MS often refuse to seek help or treatment.

To a degree, it’s understandable why someone would shy away from treatment. Treatment makes it real. Knowing someone who is suffering the way you are suffering makes it more real. And seeing someone who has had the disease for years can be a far too realistic look into the future. Fortunately, organizations and their outreach programs are there, willing and ready to assist individuals with MS, and their loved ones, at any time.

You’ve probably heard of the National MS Society whenever its annual walk or bike-a-thons take place in the area. This organization’s closest chapters are in northern and central New Jersey, Paramus and Oakhurst, as well as Philadelphia, PA. When this organization comes to us, via workplace fundraisers, local communities welcome it and

its activities with open arms. But what about the day-to-day needs of individuals in the South Jersey area?

The Multiple Sclerosis Association of America (MSAA) is conveniently located in Cherry Hill, NJ. The MSAA is a national non-profit organization. In a world where everything you could possibly need is at the click of a mouse, including the MSAA's website www.msassociation.org, if you are interested in one-on-one human interaction for support and guidance, its Haddonfield Road location is ideal.

The MSAA's homepage proudly declares this association's mission: to enrich the quality of life for everyone affected by multiple sclerosis. Although a national board of directors, made up of business persons and people with MS, oversees the MSAA's activities and services, the general public's volunteerism and generous donations are most influential. Because it is a non-profit organization, working in conjunction with volunteers, everyone in the community is invited to join the cause. The more people and organizations that help build up support and lines of communication for the association increase the hope for those challenged by MS.

Because loneliness and depression are two very common side effects, the association encourages people to understand ways to get back on track and regain hope. The MSAA offers lifelines and branching out opportunities for individuals looking for help or someone just like them to talk to. Many clients share experiences and information through the MSAA's Networking Program which offers options such as Tai Chi and yoga. Both are low impact exercises thought to be beneficial for MS patients because they stimulate the nervous systems and promote extended motor skill function. In addition, the association has two other programs which aim to help disabled clients.

“Breaking Down Barriers” is a program that strives to help individuals who have limited mobility find different types of housing options. Another program called “Easing Daily Life” loans products which will increase comfort, safety, and/or mobility so that clients’ day-to-day lives and needs are improved. Both programs, in addition to the Networking Program, provide help to persons who are in need and actively want help. However, individuals with MS who are reluctant to contact the MSAA due to fear of future uncertainty will always be welcomed if and when they chose to contact the association.

According to the MSAA’s website, research reveals that scientists are looking for connections between nutritional factors, such as fat intake and deficiencies in fish oil and vitamin D. Scientists are also testing the theory of slow-acting dormant viruses, such as measles, herpes, human T-cell lymphoma, and Epstein-Barr. The MSAA site posts scientists’ new theory: “After being exposed to one of these viruses, some researchers theorize that MS may develop in genetically susceptible people.” But who is genetically susceptible? Who has been exposed? The factors are so common almost anyone could develop multiple sclerosis.

However, MS is not a death sentence and it is not contagious. Although its causes are not fully understood, researchers are continuing to search for onset clues, therapy treatments, and ultimately a cure. But, researchers and organization like MSAA need local support, donations, and volunteerism to continue to reach out to individuals with MS and spread awareness to anyone who can help.

Mary, a volunteer whose comments are posted on MSAA’s webpage, says, "I have been asked quite often 'why work for free?' And a lot of these questions are from

students at school. I tell them 'why not? This is a great opportunity to learn' and I also tell them when they complain that nobody is hiring because you need experience. I tell them that by volunteering, this is an excellent way to get it.”

How would you feel if there were no cures for Strep throat, Chicken Pox, or simply a fever? More than likely, you'd want to know why doctors weren't working towards a cure for these treatable illnesses. Multiple Sclerosis is an increasingly common disease. As research notes, common viral infections, which anyone can be exposed to, are likely to onset scleroses. And although doctors and researchers are making strides towards finding answers about the disease's origin, too many individuals are waiting, hoping that a cure will be found during their lifetimes. Doctor's and researchers cannot make advances in medicine without help from all possible avenues.

So the next time you drive down Haddonfield Road and glance at the changing environment, be part of the change. Stop in the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America's local headquarters and get involved. You don't have to be affected with MS, or even know someone who is, to make an effect. There are volunteerism opportunities for all ages—kids, teens, adults, 55+, and corporations. Fundraising is another option—car washes, golf tournaments, picnics, and dress down days. The MSAA invites you to explore its website to learn more.

You can no longer bet on horses locally, but there is one bet South Jerseyans are sure to win. If you volunteer and extend yourself through the MSAA, you will definitely help someone in need—perhaps someone you know—maybe even yourself.

Sidebar

MS is an autoimmune disease in which the body's own white blood cells, which for an unknown reason, attack the body's cells. When the cells are attacked, the central nervous system becomes inflamed, and a lesion or plaque remains, causing nerve damage. Wherever brain messages are interrupted and nerves are damaged, the plaques harden. And once they do, they become scars, or scleroses. Some people experience short periods of symptoms that come and go, often referred to as flare-ups. Others experience continual progressive debilitations.