

Dad had been ill for 5 years and it was too late. Early diagnosis is key

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stages of the illness, and is in full-time residential care in Cornwall.

And as she speaks about her father's illness, Ruth, 48, known for her warmth and humour on the *This Morning* sofa – regularly co-hosting the Friday edition with Phillip Schofield – often loses her composure.

'I think he still knows my Mum – his eyes always light up when she walks in the room, but sometimes I'm not sure if he knows me anymore,' says Ruth, her eyes filling with tears. 'It is very hard. I adore my Dad. The only way I can describe it is that you are grieving for a loved one while they are still alive. It is the saddest kind of bereavement.'

She adds: 'He was the most clever, funny, vibrant man. He played rugby, scrambled motorbikes and flew gliders. He was handsome, the best storyteller ever and the life and soul of the party.'

'He was a fantastic father and, in my opinion, a New Man ahead of his time. He taught my sister Julia and me to fish and sail. We had such good times and love him to bits.'

'Alzheimer's is such a cruel disease because that vibrant person is taken away from you. They are still there in body but it's like the shell. The person you remember has gone.'

Her mother Joan admitted that the incident in the car was not the first worrying episode. When his camera

had gone missing, it turned out he had left it in the garden shed. Slippers turned up in the fridge. She had voiced her concerns to her GP, tentatively suggesting Alzheimer's, only to be told that it was probably forgetfulness and old age.

Despite the alarm bells, Ruth reveals it took several years for her family to get the truth that he was suffering from dementia, and by the time he was formally diagnosed 11 years ago, the disease of the brain was so advanced that doctors could do little to halt its progression with drugs.

'My father was a former Army man – meticulous and tidy,' says Ruth. 'I knew it wasn't right. When I was a child, if I borrowed the Sellotape, it had to go back in the drawer in exactly the right place.'

Her father's vagueness was also a tricky subject to broach as he was 'a fiercely proud, independent man who disliked any fuss'. In the military for 30 years, rising through the ranks to warrant officer, Dennis moved his family to various Army bases abroad.

Ruth was born in Singapore and her sister Julia, now 50, and a landscape gardener, was born in Germany. Her parents have been married 54 years.

'They met at a dance when Mum was in the Wrens. My dad was a young soldier and she was a gorgeous redhead.'

Apparently, when he saw her on the other side of the room he said to one of his friends, 'I'm going to marry that girl.'

After he left the Army in 1972 the couple moved to Cornwall where Dennis was born. They set up home in the village of Millbrook on the beautiful Rame Peninsula, where he worked in the education department for Devon County Council.

'I don't think he was ever as happy as he was in the Army. He eventually retired when he was 65. That's another thing that is so sad. My parents had so many plans for their retirement. Dad had lots of hobbies and interests – he loved photography, pottery and music.'

Until this point, Dennis had been fit and healthy. He had a small heart attack in 1996 but had recovered after a pace-maker was fitted.

As his Alzheimer's progressed, Joan's fears intensified. 'Often Mum would discuss the latest bizarre thing he'd done, but because we weren't living with it, we'd say, "I'm sure it's nothing." It was only when I spent time with him that I saw what she meant.'

The turning point was in 1997 when the couple visited London and Ruth took them to Wimbledon Village for afternoon tea. Once again, Dennis swore blind he had been to the cafe recently.

'But he was clearly talking about when we were children. I felt sick inside. And for the first time I didn't argue with him. Mum and I just said: "Really?" I knew something was seriously wrong.' When she returned



AMBASSADOR: Ruth, right, with sister Julia and mum Joan on a charity run

home, Joan, 77, went to the GP alone at Ruth's insistence. The doctor suggested a Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE), a series of simple questions to test mental ability relating to dementia.

The test – carried out at home by an old-age psychiatrist – confirmed the family's fears, but they agreed not to tell him. 'I still question whether that was the right thing to do, but every family has to deal with it their own

way,' Ruth says. 'But Dad did get to the stage where he was aware things weren't quite right.'

Some days, Ruth feels angry that the disease has robbed her five-year-old son, Jack, of a loving grandfather. 'I take Jack to the park and see grandparents playing with their grandchildren – it breaks my heart.'

Eamonn, 48, whom she has been with for 12 years, has been a great support. She says: 'He loves my Dad.'

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YOU GET A BRUISE?

A bruise is the result of damaged blood vessels seeping into surrounding tissue. The older you are, the more easily you will bruise as the collagen that normally cushions the skin breaks down with age, leaving the blood vessels more vulnerable.

Initially, a bruise will be red but will then darken to purple as haemoglobin, which gives blood its colour, degenerates and eventually fades to green or yellow as the body removes waste products.

Treat initially with an ice-pack to

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prevent further internal bleeding. The natural remedy arnica seems to speed up healing.

YOU GET A BLISTER?

A blister is a small pocket of fluid that collects under damaged skin, cushioning the tissue underneath.

Usually, blisters are filled with serum – the clear part of the blood that remains

after red blood cells and clotting agents have been removed.

This is secreted from a nearby blood vessel that has been damaged but has not ruptured.

If the vessel does rupture, a blood blister is formed. Don't pop blisters as this could cause infection.

YOU'RE BITTEN BY A MOSQUITO?

A mosquito feeds on blood, inserting its needle-like mouthparts into the skin, at the same time injecting saliva to stop the wound healing during feeding.

The body releases histamine to fight the poison, but this in turn causes itching and inflammation. A normal bite should disappear in 48 hours.

Treat with a mild steroid cream, ibuprofen gel or calamine lotion.