



Movie Review: The Eternal Memory - a reflection on ageing, dementia, and caregiving

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La Memoria Infinita (The Eternal Memory)

Language: Spanish

Director: Maite Alberdi

Cast: Augusto Góngora & Paulina Urrutia

Year of Release: 2023

Awards: Grand Jury Prize 2023, Sundance Film
Festival & Oscar Nomination

IMDb rating: 7.4/10

URL: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt24082488/>

I stumbled upon this documentary, *The Eternal Memory*, while reading a recently released book titled *Doctored* by the famous investigative science journalist Charles Piller, which explores fraud in scientific research and in drug trials on Alzheimer's disease.[1] In the last pages of the book, Piller briefly mentions the documentary and it piqued my curiosity. As I watched the movie with its poignant visuals, several questions lingered in my mind about love, care, companionship, and the fragile nature of memory. But the

most pressing one for those like me, who are in the medical profession, was this: are we truly able to comprehend what it means for our population to grow old, especially those living with dementia or Alzheimer's?

Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease and other forms of senile dementia, is not just a medical condition; it's a lived experience that reshapes entire families and reconfigures many intra-family relationships. While the West has long been grappling with dementia

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care, the reality is that India needs to as well, since its aging population is growing, and loneliness and isolation are becoming widespread.[2] A high number of India's senior citizens require medical care for issues related to senility. Unfortunately, at this juncture, reliable geriatric care services in India, such as memory care homes, long-term care facilities, and dedicated dementia care units, are lacking.[3]

This film centres on Augusto Góngora, an ageing Chilean journalist, film maker and television presenter, who, after leading a fulfilling life both personally and professionally, now lives with Alzheimer's dementia. Góngora witnessed and reported on some of Chile's most turbulent times during Pinochet's dictatorship, preserving the truth in the face of authoritarianism that sought to erase it from collective memory. He authored *Chile: The Forbidden Memory*, a work that highlights how memory defines us as individuals and societies. Ironically, life later takes a cruel turn when he is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, a condition that slowly robs him of the very thing that he had written about.

The story shows Paulina Urrutia, Augusto's wife, navigating the delicate balance between her professional life and her role as a full-time caregiver. An actress and former Minister for Culture and Arts in the Chilean government, she's able to pursue her own work or personal activities only when her ailing husband is asleep. When he is awake, she reads to him, reminds him of his past, offers him the choice of remembering different timelines from his life, and helps him navigate a world that is quickly slipping away from him. The most heartbreaking moments come when Augusto looks at her—the woman he has shared his life with for so many years—and asks, "Who are you?"

The film is a story of loss. But it is also a story of resilience, love, and adaptation in the face of adversity. It presents a model where one adapts in every possible way to make another

feel "normal," assuring them that they are not alone and that they are loved. It reminds me that a disease is not just a collection of symptoms, but a state wherein a human being is vulnerable. It made me question the ultimate definition of care, especially in the face of adversity. Too often, medicine focuses on cures and permanent treatments. But what about conditions that have no cure? What happens when the only thing left to do is to offer care itself?

Watching this film made me reflect on the current care and support available for dementia patients in India, as well as the challenges they continue to face. We often hear about our younger population, the demographic dividend, and our growing workforce. Yet, at the same time, we cannot deny that India is ageing. The proportion of elderly people in India is rising, and with it comes a rise in illness, not just Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, but also myriad diseases that cause functional and cognitive limitations. All these conditions require specialised care in clinics and at home.[3]

Unlike Western countries, where aged-care facilities and professional caregiving services are widely available, India still relies on families to take care of the elderly. But with the changing times, more young people are moving to cities for jobs or education, leaving their ageing parents behind. Loneliness among the elderly is becoming a silent epidemic. In fact, chronic loneliness and social isolation are not just consequences of dementia but are risk factors for the spectrum of senile dementia disorders.[4] Moreover, depression and anxiety associated with loneliness also accounts for rapid cognitive decline in patients with dementia.

Do we have the social and healthcare infrastructure to handle this shift in the living and care situations of the elderly in India? Screening for dementia as such is limited in our country, despite the Union Government's geriatric care programs. Initiatives, such as the Indian Council of Medical Research—

Neurocognitive Toolbox (ICMR-NCTB), aim to standardize dementia diagnosis across the country's diverse linguistic and educational landscape. However, in India, awareness of dementia is low, and symptoms are often dismissed as mere forgetfulness or old age. [5] Families struggle with access to proper care, while facing the brunt of emotional and financial burdens. Caregivers, who often have inadequate support themselves, experience stress, poor health, and a lack of respite care. [5]

Geriatric care is not just restricted to within the precincts of medicine. It is a concerted effort of several stakeholders including the state, which cannot abdicate its responsibility toward senior citizens. In our rapidly transforming country, where family structures are shifting, and the elderly are increasingly left on their own, we need to ask ourselves these questions: Are we ready? Are we building systems that will support them? Are we prepared to face the reality that one day, many of us will be in their shoes?

For those in medical practice, *The Eternal Memory* gives a clear message that not everything can be cured and it is a grim reminder about therapeutic nihilism. The measure of success in healthcare is not always about reversing a disease; sometimes, it is about ensuring that the person has a meaningful and dignified life despite their illness. Both, the daily experiences of caregiving at the family level and the support systems we nurture to care

for individuals with illnesses at the societal level, matter greatly.

Caregiving is a cardinal aspect of medical care. This film underscores the emotional and physical toll it takes yet also shows the deep love and humanity that define it. Watching Paulina care for Augusto made me think of nurses, home aides, and countless family members who dedicate their lives to caring for those who can no longer care for themselves.

This film is a must-watch for healthcare professionals, as it offers valuable insight into the daily challenges faced by individuals living with dementia and highlights how difficult it can be for them to cope. This perspective can help them to be more empathetic and holistic in their approach. Students, too, can benefit from the film as it could invite them into a deeper understanding of the practical aspects of care and its significance and remind them that compassion in caregiving is just as important as the pursuit of a cure. *The Eternal Memory* can be used in the medical classroom to emphasise empathy, humanise the idea of dementia, and allow students to reflect on the emotional aspects of long-term care.

In the end, medicine is not just about increasing longevity. It's about safeguarding that life—no matter how short—and ensuring it is lived with dignity, love, and care. *The Eternal Memory* is a poignant reminder of that truth.

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