

Countdown for baby boomers as Australian researchers warn of dementia epidemic

Looming threefold increase in dementia provokes call for action

Australian researchers have warned dementia is set to become the next big health concern for aging baby boomers, following the launch of a landmark report **today** which predicts the number of Australians with dementia will triple in the next four decades.¹

According to Mr Glenn Rees, National Executive Director, Alzheimer's Australia, "With the first wave of baby boomers commencing retirement in 2005, the number of Australians affected by dementia is expected to reach the half million mark in the next forty years."²

"The prevalence of dementia has increased 62 per cent in the last decade,³ and will be the number one cause of disability for our aging baby boomer population ahead of cardiovascular disease, cancer and depression."⁴

"The report highlights grave concerns about the current treatment and support of people with dementia and also paints a bleak picture of the fate of many aging Australians unless dementia is seriously embraced as a national health priority," he said.

Mr Rees added, "Currently in Australia, more than 60 per cent of patients in nursing homes and aged care facilities have dementia or cognitive impairment⁵, yet only six per cent of residential care beds are dementia-specific."⁶

“Clearly all aged care should embrace quality dementia care and the number of dementia-specific services should be significantly increased as soon as possible,” he said.

The report, commissioned by Alzheimer’s Australia, entitled ‘*The Dementia Epidemic: Economic Impact and Positive Solutions for Australia*’ highlights the spiralling social and economic burden of dementia on an already under-resourced aged care system and the growing number of elderly Australians with dementia living without effective treatment and care.

Professor Henry Brodaty, Academic Department for Old Age Psychiatry, University of New South Wales and Chairman of Alzheimer’s Disease International notes that in 2002, 162,000 Australians were affected by dementia with more than 6,600 of these under 65 years of age.⁷

“Even though there is no current cure for dementia, the need for early diagnosis is, and will be, critical in improving the quality of life for people with dementia. To do this GPs would need more training, access to specialist services and adequate remuneration.

“If dementia is detected early, people living with dementia and their families can benefit from early intervention programs, effective drug treatments, community support, long-term care planning, and ultimately, delayed institutionalisation and enhanced quality of life,” he said.

According to Mr Rees, “Stigma and ignorance about dementia results in many people with dementia and their families and carers becoming isolated and not accessing the support that is available in the community,” he said.

Lynne Pezzullo, health analyst, Access Economics, author of the report said, “Within the lifetime of most Australians, neurodegenerative diseases, in particular dementia, will replace systemic disorders such as cardiovascular disease and cancer as major threats to Australian health.”

She said that, “With an aged care system stretched to the limit, people with dementia and their carers are financially burdened, with carers currently providing 80 per cent of the value of informal care without compensation.⁸

“However, as the dynamics of society change many demographers are questioning whether younger generations will commit themselves to provide the home-based care of the past, and consequently, the greater the potential direct costs of dementia,” said Ms Pezzullo.

In 2002, the total cost of dementia was \$6.6 billion, of which \$3.2 billion was in direct health costs, making it the most expensive mental health item in Australia.⁹ It is estimated that direct costs associated with dementia will grow by 84 per cent by 2011.¹⁰

According to Mr Rees, “Dementia care is caught between a rock and a hard place. Currently, it does not fit completely within either the aged care or mental health portfolios, both under long term funding pressures.

“Unless a national coordinated approach is undertaken that involves intergenerational planning and acknowledges the need for health and aged care planning and spending to grow in real and relative terms, the fate of many elderly Australians will be uncertain – particularly for people with dementia complicated by psychiatric needs.

“To protect the health system from a further three billion dollar blow-out in the next decade¹¹ and to allow people with dementia a greater opportunity for a healthier life, it is essential to have greater investment in research, more dementia-specific and well-resourced community and support programs, and early diagnosis and treatment to delay institutionalisation.

“Managing the challenges presented by dementia will be the overwhelming priority of health care in the 21st century,” he concluded.

Alzheimer's Australia is a national association committed to the prevention of dementia, and values and supports people living with dementia. For information or referral on dementia call the Dementia Helpline on 1800 639 331 or visit www.alzheimers.org.au.

A full copy of 'The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia' is available at www.alzheimers.org.au.

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To arrange an interview or for further information, please contact Jennifer Stojic (0410 621 063) or Joanna Harrison (0401 592 609) at Professional Public Relations on (02) 9818 4044.

Reference:

1. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics May 2003, page 32.
2. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics May 2003, page 32.
3. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics May 2003, page 43.
4. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics May 2003, page 80.
5. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics May 2003, page 29.
6. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics, May 2003, page 30. (7,500 dementia-specific beds available in Australia).
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10. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics, May 2003, page 44.
11. *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Access Economics, May 2003, page 44.