

Dementia: A Health Care Priority in Ontario

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Purpose

This paper outlines the Alzheimer Society of Ontario's position on dementia and calls on the Government of Ontario to make this disease a health care priority.

Background

- Today in Ontario, more than 180,000 people have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia. In less than 25 years, this number will double.
- These are progressive, degenerative diseases that destroy vital brain cells. They are not a normal part of aging. Symptoms include a gradual decline of memory, changes in judgement, mood and behaviour, and an inability to perform familiar tasks.
- Progression of the disease can be slowed, but not stopped. Currently, there is no cure.
- People with dementia have complex needs that change over the course of the disease and require an evolving range of services and supports from onset to end of life.
- Early intervention in dementia has the potential to mitigate crisis situations and connects people with supports such as counselling earlier in the disease process.
- Most people with dementia in Ontario today are cared for outside of institutions, in their homes with their families. Most family caregivers in turn struggle with emotional stress, physical strain and exhaustion, depression, other illnesses and financial burdens.
- Over 70 % of those living in Ontario's long-term care homes have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.
- The current direct and indirect annual economic cost of dementia in Ontario is estimated at over \$5 billion.

Why action is necessary

Thanks to the Alzheimer Strategy (1999-2004) and more recently, the Aging at Home Strategy, Ontario is in the enviable position of advancing dementia care. To continue to address the needs of the thousands of individuals and families touched by dementia today and meet the demographic challenges that lie ahead, we must continue to:

- Expand services for people with dementia, their families and care partners
- Educate and train front line health care professionals about dementia
- Ensure more dollars are invested in biomedical and quality of care research

To achieve these goals, priority must be given to the following four areas:

Early intervention

- Continue to invest in early diagnosis and intervention, including referrals from primary care to community supports such as the First Link dementia referral program and more specialized geriatric services

Access to support and quality care

- Continue to invest in education, counselling and support for people with dementia, their families and care partners
- Ensure availability of dementia-specific respite and caregiver relief options
- Ensure ongoing dementia-specific training for staff and volunteers in long term care homes and community agencies
- Increase the number of behavioural assessment units in specific long term care homes
- Continue to sustain the Aging at Home Strategy with an emphasis on community support services and supportive housing expansion as an essential part of a health-cost containment goal

Financial support to caregivers

- Improve income tax credits aimed at caregivers
- Include self-directed funding in the range of care options for accessing supports
- Work with the Federal Government to extend compassionate care provisions of the Employment Insurance Act and the “drop-out” provisions of the Canada Pension Plan to cover time off from the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities for people with moderate to late stage dementia

Research

- Invest in research to delay and ultimately prevent the onset of dementia. More research dollars will also help find new treatments to slow the progression of the disease for those already affected and improve care options

Conclusion

Although we are facing uncertain financial times, dementia will not wait. The number of people with the disease will keep growing at an alarming rate. The impact on individuals, communities and our health care system will intensify. The Alzheimer Society urges the Government of Ontario to commit to making dementia a policy and budgetary priority.

Through a network of 39 chapters in Ontario communities, the **Alzheimer Society in Ontario** offers **help for today** by providing care and support for individuals and families living with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias, and **hope for tomorrow** by fundraising for a cure. Founded in 1983, the Alzheimer Society of Ontario’s vision is a world without Alzheimer’s disease.