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Minister for Ageing**

**Aged Care Policy Directions: The Big Picture**

Speech at the Launch of National Dementia Awareness Month.  
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**E&OE**

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests. Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to help launch dementia awareness month here in Sydney. I am delighted to do so.

As I am a politician, you might be expecting a speech full of self-congratulation, or heavy with tedious facts and figures about government funding. But I believe this occasion does not deserve that kind of speech. And anyway, I am not that kind of politician.

Yes, there are several achievements in this area of which I am proud, and you have already mentioned how the Howard government declared dementia a national health priority. It is something we take very seriously, and I follow the research we are helping to fund with considerable personal interest.

As you know, dementia is not strictly a disease in itself.

It's the term we use to describe a cluster of symptoms and conditions that involve a gradual decline in a person's ability to think and learn. Several conditions and illnesses can cause dementia. But whatever the different causes and origins, there's no doubt that dementia is now a serious issue that affects the lives of many Australians.

About 200,000 people in this country are known to have dementia. Add on the friends, families and carers of those with the condition, and you see that a substantial portion of our

society knows or has known someone who struggles with the debilitating range of symptoms we know as dementia.

Dementia presents us with enormous challenges. We recognise this, and the Dementia Initiative in the 2005 Budget contained some \$320.6 million over five years to help tackle these challenges.

As part of this commitment, I am pleased to announce today that I have signed off on funding of more than \$2 million to the Dementia Service Development Grants program.

As the name says, the idea is for the government to give money to organisations with projects that aim to improve the delivery of dementia-related services.

The money will help 16 organisations increase their research and education efforts and improve the provision of practical care and support to people with dementia, as well as their carers and families. The projects we're supporting are diverse, but all relevant at the grassroots level. For example, we have approved a project to provide mobile dementia information service in central and western New South Wales.

All of this builds upon our other funding initiatives, including a hefty \$7 million to kick-start a national collaborative dementia research effort, and more than \$1million to support 41 community-based dementia support and education projects.

In addition, I have recently approved the distribution of more than \$21.3 million for the aged care assessment program, and dementia support for assessment program in New South Wales.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have a strong interest in dementia and its ramifications. I have met many people with the condition, and I have seen the work of their dedicated carers first hand. Although we often think of dementia as being a condition of old age, that is rather inaccurate. As you know, young people can have dementia too.

Recently I was in Tasmania, visiting Oakdale Lodge. Oakdale provides care for prematurely ageing younger people with disabilities, including acquired brain injury. Some of its residents have been there for many years and are no longer so young, but Oakdale is all they can

remember. So we have an ageing in place option there for people who are now eligible for aged care places.

There's another sense in which we must separate dementia from old in our minds. I'm referring to the fact that some of the earliest pre-dementia changes in the brain can arise decades before any symptoms of the condition. Research is showing that we can stave off the onset of dementia by taking care of our brains throughout our lives.

This is why I'm pleased to see that Alzheimer's Australia has produced a booklet called *Mind your Mind*. Professor Budge will be launching it later on, as part of today's proceedings. It's a user's guide to dementia risk reduction. It outlines ways in which we can take care of our brain health – whether we are dementia-free or are in the early stages of the condition.

Now we need to get the word out about this. Something that I am personally proud of is the government's support of the dementia and memory centres. I recently opened such a centre in South Australia.

These Centres are remarkable places. They are enormously successful at reaching the people in the community who have memory concerns. They provide information, arrange seminars and workshops, have a useful library, and provide access to counselling.

Some of them also operate Memory Vans. The Vans visit shopping centres, schools, retirement communities, libraries, services clubs and the like in both metropolitan and regional areas to get the word out about memory and dementia.

That's why the federal government is working with Alzheimer's Australia and is providing nearly \$11 million over five years to establish these Centres across the country.

### **Centenary of Alzheimer's**

Despite our awareness of it for the past 100 years, dementia is still not fully understood. Medical researchers are still probing the mysteries of the mind and what causes it to malfunction. It may well be that we can never 'cure' dementia, in the sense of winding back the damage done to the brain. But we may be able to prevent it from starting in a significant number of cases, or we may be able to slow its progression or delay its onset.

As a layman, I happen to be particularly interested in mental health and the still largely mysterious workings of the brain.

The frontiers are daily being rolled back as we learn about the changes in the brain that accompany healthy ageing and compare those associated with, say, dementia and other conditions.

Are there ways in which we can promote environmental conditions that are conducive to healthy ageing – and the natural changes accompanying it – and delay the onset of pathological changes?

It seems that there are. The human body is not unchanging. The physiology – even the architecture – of a brain, is more ‘plastic’, to use the experts’ term, than we used to think.

We now realise that a brain continues to change throughout life. So the human brain can indeed be affected by how a person lives. Or how a person is cared for. And those factors, in turn, are influenced by the society of which that person is a part.

A few months ago I was in the USA, where I was lucky enough to spend time with one of the top Alzheimer specialists in the world, Professor Zaven Khachaturian. His decades of research specialised in the neurobiology of ageing and Alzheimer’s. He explained to me in detail the physical processes taking place in the brain of those with dementia. He pointed out that many of the changes we observe when a person is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s can start in your twenties – without observable symptoms – and culminate in the eventual loss of function of brain cells and accumulation of protein plaque that is the hallmark of Alzheimer’s.

So we need to think about ways in which we can detect the initial changes as early as possible and then retard further damage.

That is why the Government is investing heavily in building up the nation’s capacity to carry out relevant research, in making this research cross-disciplinary, and in disseminating the findings.

The last part – dissemination – cannot be left to chance. It is just as important as anything else. The best research in the world is useless if left to languish in an unread journal.

We need to ensure that people on the ground benefit from the research we finance, and the intellectual horsepower that we are tapping into.

It is becoming clear that an empty, boring life – without sufficient stimulation – may contribute to brain decline. Whereas keeping the mind active may be able to help us maintain what we've got. Underlying all this, of course, are those ever-important factors of good nutrition and exercise. In brief, one of the best defences against Alzheimer's could be a healthy, fulfilling and meaningful lifestyle. Of course, genetics and other factors are still of over-riding importance, but in those destined to develop dementia, we may be able to slow its progression significantly by improving lifestyles.

Ladies and gentlemen, as most of you know, it was in 1906 that the German doctor Alois Alzheimer described the condition that now bears his name.

A hundred years have passed, and the condition is now more prevalent than it was in Dr Alzheimer's day, mainly because we are living longer.

Our understanding of biomedical sciences and of the brain has increased enormously since Alzheimer's time, and yet here we are one hundred years later, with neither total prevention nor cure for Alzheimer's.

We still rely on the human touch when caring for those who are afflicted by it. And while there have been developments in making people with advanced dementia more relaxed and comfortable, we still rely on dedicated, one-on-one care, just as surely they did 100 years ago.

We provide 'care' because we care. The condition continues to challenge us but it also reveals the very best in us – the human desire to look after the most vulnerable and fragile members of society.

What does it mean to care? It means giving of ourselves - sometimes for no obvious return. It means self-sacrifice. It means valuing another person, because that individual is a human being who deserves dignity.

And what of the people who are providing the care? They too need our support. We should never forget that the person with dementia is not the only person touched by the condition. Their carers, family and friends are as well. Hence the importance of respite options, where people with dementia can be looked after while their carers have a much-needed break.

A person with dementia who can no longer do their daily tasks, is still someone's partner, or parent, or brother or sister, or former teacher, or work-mate.

Ladies and gentlemen, no doubt many of you who have had the experience of living with and caring for people from dementia would like to hope that in one hundred years from now there will be no more people with tangled webs of protein choking up the smooth functioning of their brain cells.

But I think we should not pin our hopes on miracle cures that take our problems away. Rather we should focus our hopes and our efforts on improving the way the rest of society responds and relates to people suffering from dementia.

One of my favourite pieces of writing is a piece called "attitude" by Charles Swindoll. Allow me to quote some of it to you. "The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on my life. Attitude to me is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than failures, than circumstances... It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, a home." I would add that attitude will also make or break a whole society. The attitude we display towards the most vulnerable members of our community – and who could deny that people with dementia are vulnerable – will make or break our society.

We could, on the one hand, wish them away. We could, as a society, refuse the challenge to our compassion that people with dementia present to us. If we did that, we would be denying our very humanity.

However, we also have the choice to embrace our human condition, which includes the fact that people will continue to suffer from dementia. Embracing our human condition means placing the vulnerable at the centre, rather than on the margins, of our communal life as a nation.

People with dementia do not represent some kind of mysterious genetic curse that should be bred out from our community over time. People with dementia are us. They are human beings, with a human dignity which accords them fundamental and inalienable human rights. Let us ensure that as we go forward into the future, that dignity and those rights are recognised and celebrated. That will be the test of our society.

And so it is my great pleasure to launch Dementia Awareness Month. Thank you.