

RE: Chapter 6: Preparing Australia for health needs of the future

Dementia is the major chronic disease of the 21st Century and will have a major impact on the cost of the health care system and the quality of life of millions of Australians, both people with dementia and those who support and care for them.

Already there are 269,000 Australians who have dementia and a million Australians who provide care for a person with dementia. The rapid ageing of the Australian population means the number of people with dementia is expected to increase to nearly a million by 2050. Each week over 1500 people are diagnosed with dementia.

The Gillard Government is committed to reform of aged care and this will need a sustained commitment over many years both because of the need for the radical reform necessary to meet the needs of older Australians through more flexible services and the ageing of the population. This alone will not address the dementia epidemic as the health needs of those with dementia in respect of timely diagnosis, safer hospitals, dementia risk reduction and investment in cutting edge research have yet to be addressed.

There is an urgent need for the Labour Party to make its own commitment to combating the dementia epidemic because:

- Dementia is currently the third leading cause of death in Australia
- Dementia will become the third greatest source of health and aged care spending within the next two decades.
- Dementia is core business of aged care, with over half of all residents in aged care facilities having a diagnosis of dementia.
- Dementia is already the greatest single cause of disability in older Australians (aged 65 years or older) and is responsible for one year in every six of years of disability burden for this group.
- It is estimated that dementia impacts on the lives of a million Australians who provide support for people with dementia in one way or another – from helping with shopping to 24-hour care.

Successful ageing and quality of life for millions of Australians will depend on the success of this plan if the extra years of life medical science has enabled are to be enjoyed by older Australians and their families and friends.

We know what we have to do but are not doing it including

- Changing social attitudes to dementia and making Australia a dementia friendly society
- Providing access to flexible services for people with dementia of all ages

- Taking action through the health system to achieve timely diagnosis of dementia, making hospitals safe places for people with dementia and promoting dementia risk reduction.
- Investing in research to better understand the causes of dementia and the means of stopping its progression.

These are the elements that need to be included in a comprehensive plan to tackle dementia.

The Labor Party will succeed in its goal of reforming aged care and tackling chronic diseases if it first acknowledges the impact of dementia on the health care system and then commits to taking immediate action to address dementia. The next Labor Party Platform should include a commitment to a comprehensive and funded plan to combat the dementia epidemic.

Without a comprehensive funded strategy, millions of Australians over the coming years will continue to face stigma, difficulty accessing appropriate services including diagnosis and no hope of better treatment because those who have the opportunity now have not made the investment in research.

Alzheimer's Australia would welcome the opportunity to discuss the need for this strategy further. Glenn Rees, CEO of Alzheimer's Australia can be contacted on glenn.rees@alzheimers.org.au