

**ENGAGING THE PUBLIC ON PREVENTION
INAUGURAL STATE OF PREVENTIVE HEALTH REPORT 2013**

**PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
CANBERRA**

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I AM PLEASED TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE WITH YOU AT THIS STATE OF PREVENTIVE HEALTH SYMPOSIUM AND THE LAUNCH OF THE STATE OF PREVENTIVE HEALTH REPORT.

I'D LIKE TO CONGRATULATE ALL THOSE INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPORT AND IN PARTICULAR THE CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL PREVENTIVE HEALTH AGENCY, LOUISE SYLVAN AND THE ANPHA ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS.

I'VE LONG BEEN A PASSIONATE ADVOCATE OF PREVENTIVE HEALTH STRATEGIES AND BELIEVE THE INITIATIVES THE GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN TO GIVE PREVENTIVE HEALTH A HIGHER PRIORITY ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF HEALTH REFORM.

EARLIER THIS YEAR I COMMITTED MYSELF AS AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR TO DO WHAT I COULD TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT POSITIVE AGEING AND TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO ADOPT HEALTHY LIFESTYLES TO REDUCE THEIR RISK OF SOME OF OUR MOST DEVASTATING CHRONIC DISEASES.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A JOURNALIST, THERE ARE MANY FASCINATING AND DAUNTING CHALLENGES IN SEEKING TO INFORM THE PUBLIC ABOUT PREVENTIVE HEALTH AND EVEN MORE IN CHANGING ATTITUDES.

LAST WEEK A STORY CAUGHT MY IMAGINATION THAT ILLUSTRATES THESE CHALLENGES WELL.

IT WAS A REPORT ABOUT TWO RECENTLY-RELEASED STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND DENMARK THAT SUGGEST THERE MAY BE SOME GOOD NEWS IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST DEMENTIA.

THE STUDIES CHALLENGE THE ASSUMPTION THAT PREVALENCE RATES OF DEMENTIA ARE CONSTANT ACROSS GENERATIONS AND THAT THE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA IS SIMPLY A FUNCTION OF THE NUMBER OF OLDER PEOPLE IN THE POPULATION.

WHAT THESE STUDIES FOUND WAS THAT FOR A GIVEN POPULATION COHORT, THE RISK OF DEVELOPING ALZHEIMER'S MIGHT ACTUALLY GO DOWN.

IN ENGLAND AND WALES, DEMENTIA RATES OVER THE TWO LAST DECADES WERE SHOWN TO HAVE DROPPED BY 24 PER CENT AMONG THOSE 65 AND OLDER.

AND IN DENMARK THE PERCENTAGE OF THE ELDERLY WHOSE COGNITIVE ABILITIES WERE SEVERELY IMPAIRED ALSO DROPPED BETWEEN 1998 AND 2010.

THE CHALLENGE FOR A JOURNALIST IS HOW TO PRESENT SUCH A COMPLEX STORY, NOT LEAST OF ALL BECAUSE THE VIEWS OF DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS WILL VARY SO MUCH.

THE REACTION OF SOME ALZHEIMER'S ORGANISATIONS AROUND THE WORLD WAS TO EXPRESS DOUBT ABOUT THE RESEARCH – A POINT OF VIEW THAT SOME JOURNALISTS WERE UNKIND ENOUGH TO REGARD AS SELF INTERESTED.

ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA TOOK THE VIEW THAT THE RESEARCH WAS UNQUALIFIED GOOD NEWS. WE SEE IT AS FURTHER EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE DEMENTIA RISK REDUCTION MEASURES FOR WHICH WE'VE BEEN ADVOCATING FOR MANY YEARS.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ARGUMENT OF COURSE IS THAT ALTHOUGH THE RISK OF DEMENTIA FOR ANY POPULATION MAY DECLINE OVER TIME – AND EVEN THAT MAY BE UNCERTAIN – THE TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA WILL CONTINUE TO RISE BECAUSE OF THE AGEING OF THE POPULATION.

WHAT WE KNOW NOW IS THAT SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS, OR EVEN SLIGHTLY YOUNGER COHORTS SEPARATED BY AS LITTLE AS 10YEARS MIGHT NOT HAVE THE SAME RISK.

IT IS A LOVELY THOUGHT THAT OUR GRANDCHILDREN MAY BE LESS LIKELY TO DEVELOP DEMENTIA THAN WE ARE.

THE STUDIES I HAVE TALKED ABOUT ARE OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES AND NOT RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIALS SO THEY DON'T TELL US A LOT ABOUT THE CAUSES.

IN THEIR INTERPRETATION THE AUTHORS OF THE UK STUDY SAY THAT: “THE SCALE OF REDUCTION THAT WE IDENTIFIED IS SUBSTANTIAL AND IN LINE WITH MAJOR REDUCTIONS IN RISK FACTORS IN HIGHER INCOME COUNTRIES, WHICH HAVE BEEN MODIFIED BY SOCIETAL CHANGES SUCH AS IMPROVEMENTS IN EDUCATION AND PREVENTION AND TREATMENT STRATEGIES IN RECENT DECADES”.

THEY GO ON TO MAKE AN OBSERVATION WHICH IS OF GREAT INTEREST TO ME AND MY ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA COLLEAGUES...THAT "ALTHOUGH MAJOR FACTORS COULD HAVE INCREASED DEMENTIA, PREVALENCE AT SPECIFIC AGES – SUCH AS THOSE ASSOCIATED WITH DIABETES, SURVIVAL AFTER STROKES, AND VASCULAR INCIDENTS – OTHER FACTORS WHICH COULD DECREASE PREVALENCE, SUCH AS IMPROVED PREVENTION OF VASCULAR MORBIDITY AND HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATION SEEM TO HAVE A GREATER EFFECT."

OF COURSE THERE IS THE INEVITABLE CAVEAT ABOUT THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH. WE SEE INVESTMENT IN STUDIES INTO DEMENTIA PREVALENCE AS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE GREATER INVESTMENT THAT IS NEEDED IN DEMENTIA RESEARCH.

WE NEED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT PREVALENCE AND THE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA TO PLAN SERVICES, AS CURRENTLY WE RELY ON OVERSEAS DATA.

AND IN THE CONTEXT OF PREVENTIVE HEALTH WE NEED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE FACTORS THAT ARE IMPORTANT IN PROTECTING THE BRAIN AGAINST DEMENTIA AND THE IMPACT THAT THESE FACTORS ARE HAVING ON PREVALENCE.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL PREVENTIVE HEALTH AGENCY IN 2011 WAS AN IMPORTANT FIRST STEP IN THE HEALTH REFORM PROCESS TO RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROMOTION IN AUSTRALIA.

I WELL UNDERSTAND THE CAMPAIGNS AGAINST TOBACCO, OBESITY AND HARMFUL ALCOHOL USE. THESE ARE THREE KEY HEALTH AREAS THAT IMPACT ON MANY AUSTRALIANS. BUT WE MUST GO FURTHER.

I COMMEND THE BIG PICTURE INITIATIVES THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT HAS UNDERTAKEN IN RECENT YEARS – IN PARTICULAR THE WORLD FIRST TOBACCO PLAIN PACKAGING LEGISLATION.

BUT IN ADDITION TO THESE AREAS OF FOCUS WE NEED TO DO MORE TO EDUCATE AUSTRALIANS ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT CHRONIC HEALTH CONDITONS.

THE GOAL IS THE SAME – WE WANT TO ENCOURAGE AUSTRALIANS TO ADOPT HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES. BUT THE MESSAGE BECOMES SO MUCH MORE POWERFUL WHEN WE ARE ABLE TO TELL PEOPLE THAT THROUGH HEALTHY LIFESTYLES THEY CAN REDUCE THEIR RISK FOR DISEASES AS VARIED AS DIABETES, HEART DISEASE, CANCER AND DEMENTIA.

AWARENESS OF THE POWER OF PREVENTIVE HEALTH NEEDS TO BEGIN IN CHILDHOOD AND FOLLOWED THROUGH LIFE. IT IS OF COURSE NEVER TOO LATE TO IMPROVE YOUR LIFESTYLE BUT WE KNOW THE SOONER YOU START THE BETTER IN TERMS OF YOUR RISK FOR THE MAJOR CHRONIC DISEASES.

THE POINT IS, IF WE ARE TO ENGAGE SOCIETY IN PREVENTIVE HEALTH WE HAVE TO SHOW THEM THAT THERE IS A RANGE OF BENEFITS IN RESPECT OF CHRONIC CONDITIONS.

IT'S IMPORTANT THAT THE PUBLIC IS ENGAGED IN THINKING ABOUT CHRONIC DISEASES, NOT IN THEIR SEPARATE BOXES BUT IN TERMS OF THEIR INTERRELATIONSHIPS.

GIVEN THAT DEMENTIA IS THE SECOND MOST FEARED DISEASE AFTER CANCER, AND AMONG OLDER AUSTRALIANS THE MOST FEARED DISEASE, IT IS NEGLIGENT NOT TO MAKE THE LINK BETWEEN THE DISEASES.

THERE IS NOW EVIDENCE THAT APPROXIMATELY HALF OF THE CASES OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE WORLDWIDE ARE POTENTIALLY ATTRIBUTED TO RISK FACTORS SUCH AS DIABETES, HYPERTENSION, OBESITY, SMOKING, DEPRESSION, COGNITIVE INACTIVITY AND PHYSICAL INACTIVITY.

THE THOUGHT OF DEVELOPING DEMENTIA IS FOR MANY PEOPLE ENOUGH TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO TAKE ACTION ON THEIR HEALTH. SOME ARE WILLING TO BE CARELESS ABOUT THEIR BODIES BUT FEW ARE WILLING TO TAKE AS MANY RISKS WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR MIND.

BUT IN SPITE OF OUR BEST EFFORTS THIS MESSAGE IS NOT GETTING THROUGH WELL ENOUGH. ONLY HALF OF ALL AUSTRALIANS BELIEVE THAT THEY MAY BE ABLE TO REDUCE THEIR RISK OF DEMENTIA AND MOST OF THEM ARE ONLY AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL ACTIVITY.

THEY THINK THAT DOING A SUDOKU PUZZLE EVERY DAY IS ENOUGH TO WARD OFF THIS DEVASTATING DISEASE. FEW UNDERSTAND THE LINK BETWEEN VASCULAR DISEASE AND DEMENTIA.

ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA APPRECIATES THE OPPORTUNITY THE GOVERNMENT HAS GIVEN US TO DELIVER THE WORLD'S FIRST PUBLICLY-FUNDED DEMENTIA RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM – *YOUR BRAIN MATTERS.*

THE GOVERNMENT HAS SHOWN GREAT LEADERSHIP AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS PROGRAM IS HIGHLIGHTED BY THE STUDIES I MENTIONED EARLIER.

IN TERMS OF ENGAGING THE PUBLIC, PROMOTING BRAIN HEALTH PRESENTS SOME CHALLENGES.

WE CANNOT SAY THAT IF PEOPLE DO ALL THE RIGHT THINGS, BY LOOKING AFTER THEIR BRAIN, BODY AND HEART, THAT THEY WILL DEFINITELY NOT GET A DIAGNOSIS OF DEMENTIA. BUT WE CAN SAY THAT THESE ACTIONS MAY REDUCE THEIR RISK.

AND IF AUSTRALIANS ALREADY FEAR DEMENTIA AND GO OUT OF THEIR WAY TO AVOID DISCUSSING IT, OR EVEN TO AVOID BEING WITH A FRIEND OR RELATIVE WHO MIGHT HAVE DEMENTIA, SHOULD WE PLAY THE FEAR CARD OR BE POSITIVE ABOUT REDUCING RISK?

PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA ARE SOMETIMES MADE TO FEEL GUILTY THAT THEY DID NOT DO ALL THE RIGHT THINGS – EVEN THOUGH THEY MAY WELL HAVE DONE.

THE LAST THING WE WANT TO DO IS TO INCREASE THE STIGMA WHICH IS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS CONDITION, OR FOR ANYONE TO ATTRIBUTE BLAME TO THE PERSON WITH DEMENTIA.

TO CONVEY THESE COMPLEX MESSAGES IN A SHORT SPACE IS AN ART FORM AND WE ARE WORKING VERY HARD TO FIND WAYS OF GETTING TRACTION WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY WHILE PRESENTING THE EVIDENCE IN A RESPONSIBLE WAY.

AND LIKE OTHER CHRONIC DISEASES WE NEED CHAMPIONS WHO WILL MOTIVATE AUSTRALIANS TO LISTEN TO WHAT WE HAVE TO SAY AND THEN TO TAKE THE ACTION WE PROPOSE.

WE NEED TO MAKE THE PRECIOUS DOLLARS THE GOVERNMENT HAS PROVIDED GO FURTHER THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS. SO WE ARE LOOKING FOR CORPORATE PARTNERS THAT SHARE OUR VISION OF A WORLD WITHOUT DEMENTIA.

WE'VE MADE A GOOD START WITH THE HEART FOUNDATION IN JOINT ACTIVITIES AROUND WALKING.

THE ACTIVE BODIES, ACTIVE BRAINS PROJECT IS GIVING PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA AND THEIR CARERS FROM AROUND AUSTRALIA NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO TAKE PART IN SOCIAL WALKING GROUPS THROUGH THE HEART FOUNDATION WALKING PROGRAM.

THIS PROJECT IS FUNDED BY THE ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA NATIONAL QUALITY DEMENTIA CARE INITIATIVE WITH SUPPORT OF THE ANZ, J.O. & J.R. WICKING TRUST AND BUPA CARE SERVICES.

IT'S A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THE WAY ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA IS WORKING WITH PARTNERS TO TRANSLATE EXISTING EVIDENCE ON RISK REDUCTION AND BEST PRACTICE CARE DIRECTLY INTO PRACTICE ON A NATIONAL AND SUSTAINABLE SCALE.

THE OPPORTUNITY PROVIDED BY GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR *YOUR BRAIN MATTERS* IS EXCITING. IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY THAT IS ALL THE MORE VALUED BECAUSE THERE IS NO SIGN AT THIS POINT OF RADICAL BREAKTHROUGHS IN CLINICAL TRIALS OF MODIFYING THE PROGRESSION OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE OR OTHER CAUSES OF DEMENTIA.

MANY OF THE WAYS OF ENGAGING AUSTRALIANS THAT I HAVE MENTIONED WILL BE FAMILIAR.

COSTLY NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS HAVE A ROLE. AND WE HAVE SEEN THEIR EFFECTIVENESS IN TACKLING SMOKING AND HIV AIDS.

BUT TIMES ARE TOUGH AND WE NEED TO IDENTIFY OTHER STRATEGIES. ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA HAS GENERATED MILLIONS OF DOLLARS BASED ON ADVERTISING SPACE RATES THROUGH NEW EVIDENCED-BASED PUBLICATIONS AND EVENTS. WE CAN RARELY AFFORD TO BUY SPACE DIRECTLY

AND WE'RE MOST APPRECIATIVE OF THE SUPPORT WE'VE RECEIVED FROM BOTH THE ELECTRONIC AND PRINT MEDIA WHO HAVE COVERED OUR STORIES.

IN MORE RECENT TIMES THE EXPERT USE OF USE OF BRANDING AND MARKETING COMBINED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA HAS ENABLED US TO REACH NEW TARGET GROUPS AND TO REACH LARGE NUMBERS OF AUSTRALIANS AT LOW COST.

I SUGGEST WE ALL NEED TO FIND STRATEGIES THAT ENGAGE PEOPLE IN NEW WAYS.

**IMPORTANT AMONG THESE I BELIEVE IS EMBRACING SOCIAL ACTION
IN THE AREA OF AGEING.**

**THIS INCLUDES NEW CONCEPTS OF DEMENTIA- FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES
AND DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY ORGANISATIONS. BY ENGAGING AUSTRALIANS
WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE DEMENTIA. IN THIS WAY WE WILL BE ABLE TO
TACKLE THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH THE DISEASE.**

**WE NEED A COMMUNITY THAT UNDERSTANDS DEMENTIA AND DOES NOT
SHUT DOWN AS SOON AS THE WORD DEMENTIA IS MENTIONED.**

IT WILL BE A LONG HAUL

**PREVENTIVE HEALTH GIVES US A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO SAY
SOMETHING POSITIVE TO THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY ABOUT DEMENTIA,
A CHRONIC DISEASE THEY FEAR.**

**PREVENTIVE HEALTH MUST BECOME A CORNERSTONE OF HEALTH POLICY
IN OUR COUNTRY. FOR TOO LONG OUR FOCUS HAS BEEN ON CARING FOR
THOSE WHO ARE SICK WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO PREVENT
ILLNESS IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

THE FOCUS ON PREVENTION AND WELLNESS IS NOW BEING RECOGNISED IN THE AGED CARE REFORMS WHICH HAVE A NEW FOCUS ON ASSISTING PEOPLE TO MAXIMISE THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION.

I THINK WE CAN CONGRATULATE OURSELVES AND RECOGNISE THE PROGRESS THAT HAS BEEN MADE OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS.

BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR PREVENTIVE HEALTH TO BE ON THE GOVERNMENT AGENDA. PREVENTION NEEDS TO BE ON THE AGENDA OF ALL AUSTRALIANS.

THE MESSAGE IS STARTING TO GET THROUGH IN SOME AREAS, WITH DECLINING SMOKING RATES, AND IMPROVED CONTROL OF CHOLESTEROL.

BUT I MUST BE HONEST SOME OF THE NUMBERS DO SCARE ME; MORE THAN 60 PER CENT OF AUSTRALIANS ARE OBESE OR OVERWEIGHT. TWO THIRDS OF AUSTRALIAN ARE SEDENTARY OR PARTICIPATE IN VERY LITTLE EXERCISE.

JUST IMAGINE THE DIFFERENCE IN QUALITY OF LIFE AS WE AGE IF WE HAD A THIRD LESS CHRONIC DISEASE. THE RESEARCH SHOWS THIS CAN BE ACHIEVED BUT ONLY IF WE ADOPT HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES.

I VERY MUCH HOPE THAT PREVENTIVE HEALTH POLICIES DEVELOPED OVER THE COMING YEARS EMPHASISE THE LINKS BETWEEN PHYSICAL EXERCISE AND BRAIN HEALTH AND THE COMMON FACTORS THAT OPERATE BETWEEN THEM IN TERMS OF LIFESTYLE, ENVIRONMENT AND PHYSICAL EXERCISE.

I ALSO HOPE THAT WE CAN BE GOOD COMMUNICATORS AND FIND NEW AND INNOVATIVE WAYS TO GET PEOPLE EXCITED ABOUT THE POWER OF PREVENTION.

AND LASTLY, I HOPE THAT THE WHOLE COMMUNITY PLAYS THEIR ROLE IN PREVENTIVE HEALTH – GOVERNMENT, BUSINESS, INDUSTRY, WORKPLACES, FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS...

...BECAUSE I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT TOGETHER WE CAN BE A HEALTHY AUSTRALIA.