Dementia has become the leading cause of death among Australian women and remains the second leading cause of all Australians, according to new statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics today.

The Causes of Death, Australia, 2016, found that dementia, remains the second leading cause of death with 13,126 deaths in 2016 behind Ischaemic heart disease with 19,077 deaths.

While the number death rates for Ischaemic heart disease have been declining the number of deaths from dementia has been increasing accounting for 8.3 per cent of all deaths in 2016, up from 5.3 per cent of all deaths in 2007.

Individuals who died from dementia were more likely to be over 85, with a median age of 88.8 in 2016, and more likely to be female (accounting for 64.4 per cent of all dementia deaths)

The ABS also found that improvements in treatments and prevention of heart disease have contributed to increased life expectancy, but deaths from conditions such as dementia have continued to increase.

While dementia overall remains the second leading cause of death, dementia, including Alzheimer’s disease, has replaced heart disease as the leading cause of death among women.

The ABS says in 2016, 8,447 women died from dementia in 2016, an increase of 196 deaths compared with 8,251 in 2015. This is the first time since the early part of the 20th century that heart disease is not the leading cause of death for both sexes.

Dementia is the third leading cause of deaths for males with 4,679 deaths recorded in 2016.

The ABS found that while heart disease is still the leading cause of death for men it is likely in time that this will be surpassed by dementia as treatments for other leading causes improve and men live longer lives.

Overall 1 in 12 of the 158,504 deaths in Australia had dementia as the underlying cause, this equates to around 36 deaths a day. Dementia accounted for 40.9 deaths per 100,000 people in 2016 compared to 30.7 in 2007.
Dementia became Australia’s second leading cause of death in 2013, overtaking cerebrovascular diseases (strokes) for the first time. In 2014, 2015 and now 2016 the number of dementia deaths have continued to rise.

Alzheimer’s Australia Chief Executive Officer Maree McCabe said it was disappointing to see that dementia was now the leading cause of death in women in Australia and that the overall rates for dementia were increasing.

“This fact combined with the increasing prevalence of dementia is surely a cause of concern for all Australians,” she said.

“While we are living longer lives more and more of our mothers, sisters, daughters and partners face a future of living with dementia and eventually dying of dementia.

“Dementia is undoubtedly one of the biggest public health challenges facing Australia, with more than 413,000 Australians living with dementia and an estimated 1.2 million people involved in the care of someone with dementia.

“Without a significant medical breakthrough, the number of people with dementia is expected to grow to 1.1 million by 2056.

“The emotional cost to the person living with dementia and their loved ones is profound.

“While the annual cost of dementia in Australia is currently $14.67 billion and is expected to be $36.85 billion by 2056.

“This new data shows the enormous impact that dementia has, and will continue to have, on our health system, our communities and our society in general.”

Ms McCabe said the new data highlighted the need to continue the commitment to find a cure for dementia while continuing to educate the community and raise awareness about dementia.

“As a nation we need to do more to reduce people’s risk of dementia so that the onset of dementia in individuals is avoided or delayed, resulting in fewer people in the community having dementia,” she said

“While it is heartening to see that less Australian women are dying from heart disease due to better treatment options and support, there is still no cure for dementia and people with dementia still struggle to find appropriate support and services.

“More than ever we need to focus on solutions that will meet the specific needs of people living with dementia and their carers and families.

“This includes a multipronged strategy that can reduce the risk and prevalence of dementia, while still building capacity within our communities to understand the needs of people with dementia, and giving people with dementia and their family and carers the specialised support they need in navigating our complex health system.”

Ms McCabe said few Australians knew they could reduce their risk for dementia, let alone understand how to do so.
“What is good for your heart is good for your brain, and this includes keeping physically active, mentally challenged, eating a brain healthy diet, getting regular health checks and remaining socially engaged,” she said.

“Alzheimer’s Australia, through its Your Brain Matters Program, educates Australians about brain health and alerts people to the links between lifestyle and health factors, their risk of cognitive impairment and dementia, and their risk of developing other chronic conditions.”

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Notes to media: Stories in the media about dementia may prompt concerns or cause distress for audiences and readers. When writing or talking about dementia, please encourage your audience/readers with the number for our National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500, a free call, telephone information and support service available across Australia.

What is appropriate language for talking about dementia and why do we need it?
The words used to talk about dementia can have a significant impact on how people with dementia are viewed and treated in our community.
In particular please avoid the use of the word sufferer or suffering – the preferred language is a person/people living with dementia.
Please read our Dementia Language Guidelines that have been developed by people living with dementia and carers.

About Alzheimer’s Australia
There are 413,000 Australians living with dementia. This figure is predicted to rise to 1.1 million by 2056 in the absence of a significant medical breakthrough. Alzheimer’s Australia is the charity and peak body representing people of all ages, with all forms of dementia, in Australia. We provide specialised dementia information, education and support services. Call our National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500 or visit www.fightdementia.org.au