EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alzheimer’s Australia Vic commends the Department of Health and Human Services on their commitment to improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing in Victoria. As the peak organisation representing people living with all forms of dementia and their carers, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion.

Over the last two decades, a number of studies have been conducted across the country into the prevalence of dementia in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The results have highlighted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience dementia at a rate 3 to 5 times higher than the general Australian population\(^1\). Despite these higher rates of dementia have been reported in Aboriginal people, it still goes largely unrecognised in these communities and by health workers and service providers.

Our experience working with aboriginal communities, service providers and health workers across Victoria, to raise awareness and improve responsiveness to this issue and those affected supports this low level of recognition and awareness.

For more than 30 years Alzheimer’s Australia Vic has worked with members, consumers, stakeholders and all levels of government to ensure that people with dementia, their families and carers are appropriately supported – whether that be within their workplace, home (including residential aged care) or their local community.

Our engagement with consumers means that Alzheimer’s Australia Vic is strong advocate for those impacted by dementia and we advise on related policy matters, identify service gaps and draw on our expertise to collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders.

This submission includes the following recommendation to ensure that Aboriginal people of Victoria, family members and communities have access to awareness, information, and appropriate support services for people with dementia.

RECOMMENDATION

Dementia should be incorporated into the Aboriginal health and wellbeing strategic plan to ensure that Aboriginal people of Victoria are:

- Aware of the modifiable risk factors associated with dementia and adequately address them.
- Understand the nature of dementia and the importance of timely diagnosis
- Know where to go for services and support.

\(^1\) Alzheimer’s Australia 2014. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: A review of the research.
INTRODUCTION

Alzheimer’s Australia Vic offers this submission to inform the development of a new Aboriginal health and wellbeing strategic plan for Victoria. As the peak body we support the Government’s vision to improve Aboriginal health and wellbeing in Victoria.

We are committed to continuing to work in partnership with the Government, our members, consumers and other stakeholders to progress the seven priority action areas identified by the Victorian Government in their Supporting People with Dementia and their Families and Carers: Dementia Action Plan 2014-18, namely:

- Supporting the health and wellbeing of older people to reduce the possible risk factors for dementia, and increasing awareness of and responsiveness to dementia;
- Supporting access to appropriate assessment and diagnosis;
- Planning for diversity in the delivery of support and services;
- Maximising independence, health and wellbeing of people with dementia;
- Promote dementia-friendliness in all communities;
- Supporting families and carers of people with dementia; and
- Supporting people with dementia at the end of their lives.

Although higher rates of dementia have been reported in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the disease is often overlooked by Aboriginal communities, health workers communities, health workers and service providers. A lack of education and awareness in communities and by health workers and the prevalence of other chronic diseases have all posed considerable barriers to the recognition of dementia as an emerging health issue.

If we are to overcome the unacceptable health disparity and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people then a better understanding of dementia by Aboriginal and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, health workers and service providers will be essential.

WHY FOCUS ON DEMENTIA?

Dementia is the term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses that cause a progressive decline in a person’s brain function. It is a broad term used to describe impairments in memory, thinking and behaviour. Dementia can affect any adult but it is much more common after the age of 65 (though it is not a natural part of ageing). Dementia is the second leading cause of death of Australians and is the major chronic disease of the twenty-first century. In 2012 dementia was recognised by the Australian State and Territory Health ministers as a National Health Priority Area.

There are currently around 96,789 people living with dementia in Victoria and the number is projected to increase to 386,397 by 2050 unless there is a medical breakthrough.

Dementia is a significant problem in Aboriginal communities. As life expectancy increases for

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Aboriginal people, so does the risk of developing dementia. Factors that increase the chance of Aboriginal people getting dementia include: high rates of chronic diseases like diabetes and stroke; childhood infections such as periodontal disease; head injuries and cognitive damage due to drug and alcohol use. Far greater percentages of Aboriginal people need dementia and aged care services before 55 years of age than people of non-Aboriginal background.

Dementia is viewed and experienced differently by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and often goes unrecognised as a medical condition. The behavioural changes associated with dementia may be viewed as “sickness” or “madness” with many people only seeking assistance when the behaviour breaks cultural norms.

There is mounting evidence supporting the efficacy of preventative health strategies and early interventions which aim to identify and modify the risk factors associated with major chronic diseases. These strategies can have a considerable impact on preventing or delaying the onset of dementia in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Increased awareness about dementia among Aboriginal people, and ways to support Aboriginal people with dementia within their communities, can make a huge difference to people’s quality of life.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Alzheimer’s Australia Vic believes that to meet the needs and aspirations of Victoria’s Aboriginal peoples, dementia must be seen as a priority focus area in the Department of Health and Human Services Aboriginal health and wellbeing strategic plan.

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4 Ibid. Arkles et al., 2010 p. 2.