

Alzheimer's Australia
Fight Dementia Campaign & March

Parliament House
Canberra

October 13, 2011
Ita Buttrose AO, OBE
President, Alzheimer's Australia

What a memorable day this is. The day we made up our minds to raise our collective voices about dementia and its impact on those people who have the disease and those of us who care for them. This is a very brave step forward and now we have taken this step there will be no going backwards. I can assure you I certainly won't be going backwards. I am committed to raising awareness about dementia. If I have to raise my voice until I am hoarse then so be it.

Thank you all for taking the time to come to this march today. Some of you have come from as far away as Western Australia. Where are you? And the Northern Territory. There are people here from Tassie and also Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, NSW and of course the ACT. A warm welcome to you all.

Being here is simply a wonderful commitment. I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to be in Canberra today. Our thanks also to the many national organisations that have support Alzheimer's Australia in our Fight Dementia Campaign. And special thanks to the workers who provide the care – the Australia Nurses Federation and United Voice.

Thanks too to the service providers that have supported us – BUPA care services, Uniting Care and Catholic Health Australia and our sister consumer bodies, Carers Australia, Council of the Ageing and Consumers Health Forum. And of course my sincere thanks to the state and territory Alzheimer's organisations that have done so much to support our national office in organising this march and to make sure that federal politicians across Australia know about our campaign.

The reason we are marching today is to show that we, each and every one of us, is ready to stand up and fight dementia. We represent over one million Australians, both people with the disease and their carers, affected by dementia and we are sending a clear message to our politicians that we want them to join us in this fight. We need their support to help us beat this terrible disease.

By 2020, just eight short years away, 75,000 baby boomers will have dementia, and by 2050, unless there is a medical breakthrough, almost one million people will have the disease. That's a frightening figure. What would you do if you were one of the one million people? What would you do if someone you loved was diagnosed with dementia?

In spite of the prevalence of dementia many people still do not know that dementia is a terminal illness. Few people, far too few, understand that they can reduce their risk of dementia through changes in lifestyle. Many still assume that dementia is a natural part of ageing. It isn't. We have to change this kind of thinking.

In the past dementia was stigmatised. People with dementia were hidden or ignored and little was done to help them. We have marched and are here today to tell all Australians that there is no shame in having dementia and that we need determined action to fight the disease.

Alzheimer's Australia is committed to the fight. As its president, I am passionately committed. And we, and I, need all of you to stand with us. We have come a long way today - there can be no going back. There is much that we can do.

Firstly, we must share our stories and publicly support one another; Cancer used to be the Big C, Hazel Hawke called Alzheimer's the Big A. We are now beating cancer every day. We must do the same with dementia. We must stand up and let people know that dementia cannot be ignored. In marching today, we are showing our determination to tell the dementia story.

Secondly, we must insist that our government responds to the challenge of dementia in the same way that it has responded to the challenge of mental health and other chronic diseases. There is little recognition in health policy that dementia is a chronic disease. In fact, dementia is the major chronic disease of the 21st century.

Yet there is inadequate investment in research to find effective treatments and dementia risk reduction is not included in preventative health strategies. Health reforms come and go with no mention of dementia. There has, for example, been no recognition in the reforms of primary care for the fifty per cent under-diagnosis of dementia or the challenge this presents.

A new report, Dementia Across Australia 2011-2050 released today by Deloitte Access Economics, shows that the number of Australians with dementia is expected to increase to 385,000 people. Up almost 50 per cent in just 10 years. These new figures demonstrate the urgency with which Australia must respond. Dementia must be a part of aged care reform. Dementia must be made a priority. We need action now!

We need positive action through a \$500 million dementia action plan over five years to:

- Promote awareness and understanding of dementia so that people seek a diagnosis in the knowledge that this will benefit them.
- We need community and residential care services that are sensitive to the needs of people with dementia. Respite that not only gives the carer a break, but for the individual with dementia, social engagement or access to activities that have been a lifelong interest.
- We need to recognise those individuals with dementia in acute care, to provide appropriate care and make them safe from falls and confusion.
- We need to reduce the future numbers of people with dementia through greater awareness of risk reduction activities.
- And finally, investment in dementia research so that we can do all we can to ensure that the reality of nearly a million Australians with dementia does not come about on that scale.

We are telling our story today, in part, at our National Alzheimer's Conference. This year minister Butler gave a passionate speech that encouraged us to do so. Given that support, we were shocked and dismayed that in the last federal budget there was no additional funding for any dementia services or research. Of even greater concern the government terminated the Dementia Initiative as

of 2013. Dementia is no longer a health priority; why the government has decided this is baffling. Dementia must be a national health priority. That's why you are here today – to tell your elected representatives that your needs are not being represented.

Prime Minister Gillard has said her government is committed to aged care reform. We need to make sure people with dementia, their families and their carers are included in that reform and that dementia is given priority status. Minister Butler understands our issues and we value his support. 22 of his colleagues on both sides of parliament have signed up as dementia champions.

The 2012 budget is the time for action and all of us need to do everything we can to ensure that Australia's dementia epidemic is taken seriously by our elected representatives. Five hundred million dollars over five years is needed to address awareness, early diagnosis, quality dementia care, dementia risk reduction and investment in dementia research. It is time for us to take off the velvet glove and put on the iron fist.