Media Release

ANTIPSYCHOTICS OVERUSED IN DEMENTIA

The Parliamentary Friends of Dementia will convene a meeting today to discuss the widespread use of antipsychotic medications in people with dementia.

Associate Professor Gerard Byrne, Head of the Academic Discipline of Psychiatry at University of Queensland said, “Antipsychotics are highly potent prescription medications. They have very serious side-effects including increased risk of stroke and death, and have little benefit for most people with dementia.

“Yet increasingly, we are seeing them used as a first-line treatment in aged care facilities to sedate anyone with dementia who exhibits behavioural symptoms.”

Co-Convenor of the Parliamentary Friends, the Hon Teresa Gambaro, MP said, “There is increasing concern about the possible misuse of antipsychotics for the treatment of individuals with dementia. It is an issue with significant budget implications that cuts across the aged care and mental health systems.”

Associate Professor Byrne said, “Too often antipsychotics are used as a form of chemical restraint for people with dementia who exhibit behaviours such as agitation, wandering or calling out.

“More often than not, these behaviours are signs of other problems such as pain, confusion, loneliness or hunger that the person with advanced dementia can’t communicate otherwise.

“What we ought to be doing, and what the evidence tells us in best practice, is assessing and addressing the needs of individuals with dementia before resorting to the prescription pad and the pill bottle.

“There needs to be an approach to this issue that balances the importance of psychosocial approaches to treating behavioural symptoms of dementia with the understanding that for a small number of individuals with behavioural symptoms of dementia, antipsychotics are the only option that works.”

Co-Convenor of Parliamentary Friends of Dementia, Ms Sharon Grierson, MP agreed, “As politicians, we need to act to ensure that the 269,000 Australians with dementia receive the best possible care.

“The meetings today will provide an opportunity for Members of Parliament on both sides of politics to become better informed about this very important issue, and to get a better understanding of the treatment of behavioural symptoms of dementia.”

Glenn Rees, CEO of Alzheimer’s Australia said, “Both the UK and the US governments have taken action to reduce the overuse of these medications in people with dementia.

“Until our Government leaders commit to doing the same, I fear that antipsychotic medications will continue to be used far too often and to the detriment of people with dementia in Australia.”

For interviews with Associate Professor Byrne or Glenn Rees, please contact Tegan McGrath on 02 6278 8924 or 0407 232 212.
Key facts and statistics

- An estimated 269,000 Australians currently live with dementia.
- Without a significant medical breakthrough, that is expected to soar to about 981,000 by 2050.
- Each week, there are 1500 new cases of dementia in Australia. That is expected to grow to 7,400 new diagnoses each week by 2050.
- Dementia is the third leading cause of death in Australia, after heart disease and stroke.
- One in four people over the age of 85 have dementia.
- Dementia is fatal and, as yet, there is no cure.
- Dementia has an impact on every part of the health and care system.
- The total estimated worldwide costs of dementia were US$604 billion in 2010.
- These costs account for about 1% of the world’s gross domestic product.
- If dementia were a country, it would be the world’s 18th largest economy.
- If it were a company, it would be the world’s largest, exceeding Wal-Mart (US$414 billion) and Exxon Mobil (US$311 billion).
- Australia faces a shortage of more than 150,000 paid and unpaid carers for people with dementia by 2029.
- The cost of replacing all family carers with paid carers is estimated at $5.5 billion per annum.
- Dementia will become the third greatest source of health and residential aged care spending within two decades. These costs alone will be around 1% of GDP.
- By the 2060s, spending on dementia is set to outstrip that of any other health condition. It is projected to be $83 billion (in 2006-07 dollars), and will represent around 11% of the entire health and residential aged care sector spending.
- Dementia is already the single greatest cause of disability in older Australians (aged 65 years or older).

What is dementia?
Dementia is the term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in a person’s functioning. It is a broad term used to describe a loss of memory, intellect, rationality, social skills and physical functioning. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia, accounting for between 50 – 70% of all dementia cases.

Dementia can happen to anybody, but it is more common after the age of 65. However, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s can also have dementia.

Alzheimer’s Australia is the peak body for people with dementia and their families and carers. It provides advocacy, support services, education and information.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500
(The National Dementia Helpline is an Australian Government Initiative)
Dementia is a National Health Priority

www.alzheimers.org.au

---

1 Caring Places: Planning for Aged Care and Dementia 2010 – 2050, Access Economics, July 2010
2 Keeping Dementia Front of Mind: Incidence and prevalence 2009 – 2050, Access Economics, August 2009
5 Making Choices, Future Dementia Care: Projections, Problems and Preferences, Access Economics, May 2009