Media Release

Ita asks researchers to join the fight against dementia

Ita Buttrose, President of Alzheimer’s Australia, has urged an international gathering of researchers to join Alzheimer’s Australia and the 1.5 million Australians affected by dementia in their Fight Dementia campaign.

Speaking at the Research and Standardisation in Alzheimer’s Disease Conference at the Melbourne Brain Centre yesterday, Ms Buttrose outlined the case for more research funding and the need for better understanding of dementia.

“Our biggest challenge lies in convincing the community and the government that dementia is not a natural part of ageing – it is caused by diseases of the brain,” she said.

“Alzheimer’s Australia believes dementia is a disease that can be beaten but to do so we need a much greater investment in research.”

Ms Buttrose told researchers that funding for dementia research in Australia is desperately inadequate.

“The figures speak for themselves. For the year 2011-2012 the government through the National Health and Medical Research Council allocated $24 million on dementia research.

“For that same period the council funded; $159.2 million on cancer research; $92.4 million on cardiovascular disease research; $71.2 million on diabetes research; and $53.6 million on mental health research.

“Too few people realise scientists are currently making breakthroughs that will potentially allow Alzheimer’s disease to be identified while people are in their 40s and 50s, many years before dementia symptoms appear. This will lead to new opportunities for early intervention and treatment.

“The work you are doing is at the very forefront of human endeavour,” Ms Buttrose told researchers at the conference.

“It should be seen as exciting and challenging as discovering the mysteries of the universe, or of landing a man on the moon. We must take every opportunity to do more to communicate the excitement of world-wide dementia research as the cutting edge of medical science in this century.”

Alzheimer’s Australia launched its Fight Dementia campaign in October last year to lobby the Federal Government to establish a national action plan to combat dementia.

“We are seeking a commitment in the 2012 Federal Budget of $500 million over five years for our Fight Dementia action plan,” Ms Buttrose said.

“This will support increased awareness, early diagnosis, better care and support for people with dementia, a risk reduction program and increased investment in research.

“Research is vital if we are to beat dementia. Our strategic plan calls for $200 million of the $500 million to be used for dementia research.

“We need to ensure that the results of research get into practice as soon as possible to benefit people with dementia. This has to be done in partnership between consumers, service providers and researchers. In this way we can beat dementia.”

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Key facts and statistics 2012

- There are almost 280,000 Australians currently living with dementia
- Without a major medical breakthrough, these numbers are expected to soar to almost 943,000 by 2050
- Each week, there are 1,600 new cases of dementia in Australia; one person every 6 minutes. This is expected to grow to 7,400 new cases each week by 2050
- There are approximately 16,000 people in Australia with Younger Onset Dementia (a diagnosis of dementia under the age of 65)
- 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
- On average symptoms of dementia are noticed by families 3 years before a firm diagnosis is made
- In high income countries only 20-50% of people living with dementia are recognised and documented in primary care
- An estimated 1.2 million Australians are caring for someone with dementia in some way
- 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)
- More than 50% of residents in Australian Government-subsidised aged care facilities have dementia (104,400 out of 198,500 permanent residents in 2008-09)

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 40s and 50s can also have dementia.

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1 Dementia Across Australia 2011-2050, Deloitte Access Economics, October 2011
2 Keeping Dementia Front of Mind: Incidence and prevalence 2009 – 2050, Access Economics, August 2009
4 Timely Diagnosis of Dementia: Can we do better?, Phillips, J., Pond, D., Goode, Susan, September 2011
6 Pfizer Health Report Issue #45 – Dementia, March 2011
8 Making Choices, Future Dementia Care: Projections, Problems and Preferences, Access Economics, May 2009
9 Dementia among aged care residents: first information from the Aged Care Funding Instrument, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, May 2011
Alzheimer’s Australia is the charity for people with dementia and their families and carers. As the peak body, 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.fightdementia.org.au