Hello Dementia News readers,

Brisbane to Melbourne – approximately 1,700 kilometres between cities. Takes about two hours by plane or a couple of days to drive but what about walking? The Bennett Family have found out and at the same time been promoting awareness for dementia research.

Leaving Brisbane on the 1st of November, AJ and Skye began pushing their two young boys Xavier and Andre all the way to Melbourne (pictured below at the finish line). They arrived in Melbourne yesterday – exactly one month later. On their journey they passed through multiple Australian towns and cities, met and inspired many locals to donate, went through five pairs of shoes (each) and endless pram tyres and had to overcome rain, hail and shine – but they made it.

AJ’s mum has dementia and as her symptoms progressed and she needed more care and support, he knew he wanted to do something special to be able to both raise awareness about dementia and money for research. It is certainly an inspirational story and you can learn more about the Bennetts’ journey here - www.b2m4alzheimers.org

The Bennett Family at their final stop Luna Park in Melbourne.
(Photos by Darren James)
In the last edition, I also told you about Claire and Jayne, two sisters swimming for dementia research. On Sunday the 24th of November, they set off from Great Keppel Island to Yeppoon’s main beach. They spent more than eight hours in the water, encountering stingers, choppy conditions and swimming against the current. The sisters were overwhelmed by the support of their local community. Claire told us “the crowd was incredible, a few hundred people were down at the beach cheering us in and it was absolutely amazing!” While this swim had been attempted by others, it had never been achieved. Not only have Claire and Jayne raised more than $18,000 for dementia research, they have also written their chapter into the local history books by completing this heroic swim. You can still support Claire and Jayne here - http://personalchallenge.gofundraise.com.au/page/AquaAdventure

It doesn’t stop there – to finish off this triathlon of research fundraising events, Belinda Goodenough and a team of bike riders participated in the Great Victoria Bike Ride from Mount Gambier to Geelong which finished yesterday – also raising money for dementia research. Information on Belinda’s journey can be found here - www.everydayhero.com.au/young_goodenough

We are constantly inspired by what people are willing to do to raise money for dementia research. Congratulations to you all and we look forward to bringing you more of these stories in 2014.

In this edition of Dementia News, you’ll find out about two different studies which suggests that singing and meditation and yoga can improve the lives of those with or at risk of dementia. While, another large scale analysis of data has looked into the link between macular degeneration and dementia.

In the Discuss section I report on statins – cholesterol lowering drugs which have caused some controversy in the media lately. Since cardiovascular disease is a risk factor for dementia – I thought I’d look into the latest research.

As we get ready to farewell 2013, there is only more edition of Dementia News for the year. So I look forward to telling you some of the new initiatives Dementia News is going to be bringing you in 2014. Once again a big thankyou to everyone who filled out our recent survey – the feedback was very useful.

I hope you enjoy this, the penultimate edition of Dementia News for 2013.

Dementia News editor
Ian McDonald
People with dementia who took part in regular singing sessions showed improvements in their brain function. This result was presented by Associate Professor Jane Flinn from George Mason University, USA at the recent Society of Neuroscience conference held in San Diego. Forty-five people aged between 70 and 99 who had moderate to severe dementia and were living in a care facility in the USA took part in the singing sessions. Participants were divided into groups of singers and listeners and the singing sessions were run three times per week over a four month period.

At the end of the trial, it was found that on average, those who sang scored higher on cognitive and drawing tests and on a life satisfaction questionnaire than those who just listened. Singers also had an improvement in both mood and certain types of memory following the sessions. Interestingly, the study also found that singing stimulated different areas of the brain which help with vision, movement and speech.

While familiar songs from musicals such as the Sound of Music and the Wizard of Oz were obvious song choices, the study saw similar benefits from unfamiliar songs as well. Linda Maguire, music therapist and leader of the singing sessions said “the participants also responded beautifully to music they had never heard before.”

Music therapy is a common strategy for improving the quality of life for people with dementia, as musical skill and appreciation are two abilities which often remain until the final stages of dementia, and music can be a calming influence at any stage. However, this study is novel in that it has noted a difference in brain performance between those who sang and those who just listened.

If you are interested in music therapy in Australia you can ring the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500 to find out about music groups for people with dementia that may be operating near you. Alzheimer’s Australia also has information on our website here.

For more information click on the links below:
Conference Link: Society of Neuroscience
Media Link: The Guardian
Media Link: Independent
MEDITATION AND YOGA REDUCING STRESS ON THE BRAIN

Namaste – research has shown that a combination of meditation and yoga reduced the rate of brain shrinkage among a group of people with a mild cognitive impairment. This result was published in *Neuroscience Letters* by researchers from the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre, USA. The researchers developed an intervention program which included regular sessions of meditation and yoga. Fourteen participants with mild cognitive impairment, aged between 55 to 90 years, were divided into two groups. One group undertook two hours of yoga and meditation per week and the other group received usual care. The trial went for eight weeks.

The researchers found that those who took part in the meditation and yoga classes showed less shrinkage of the hippocampus (the brain’s memory centre) and better connectivity between other regions of the brain also responsible for memory. While not everyone who is diagnosed with a mild cognitive impairment progresses to dementia, this study confirms what other research has suggested: that stress reduction interventions may help to reduce the risk of dementia. The researchers now plan to undertake a larger trial to confirm this initial result. We will keep you posted.

For more information click on the links below:
Journal link: Neuroscience letters
Media Link: Medical News Today

NO LINK FOUND BETWEEN MACULAR DEGENERATION AND DEMENTIA

In one of the biggest studies to date, researchers have found no evidence to suggest a link between macular degeneration and dementia. Macular degeneration is a common age-related eye disease that causes progressive loss of central vision, and there have been a number of studies suggesting a link between macular degeneration and dementia based on similar disease pathology, shared risk factors (such as smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol) and some evidence of common genetic factors.

Researcher’s, from the UK, analysed records collected over 13 years from 65,894 people with macular degeneration, 168,092 people with dementia, and 7.7 million people with neither condition. Analysis showed that there was no increase in risk of dementia following a diagnosis of macular degeneration, and that the risk of macular degeneration following a diagnosis of dementia was very low. However, people with both dementia and macular degeneration appeared less likely to receive treatment for their macular degeneration than those without dementia. The researchers concluded that while this was a promising result for people with either condition, there is still a need to determine whether people with dementia receive appropriate examination and treatment for macular degeneration, and if there are any barriers which need to be overcome.

For more information click on the links below:
Journal Link: JAMA Ophthalmology
Media Link: Health Day
Statins are a group of cholesterol lowering drugs that are widely prescribed to people at risk of cardiovascular disease. They work by blocking the action of an enzyme in the body which produces cholesterol. Because cardiovascular disease is also a major risk factor for dementia, it is likely that appropriate use of statins may have a secondary benefit for those people with cardiovascular disease of helping to reduce the risk of dementia.

In early November, ABC1’s science program Catalyst screened two features that raised questions about the benefit of statins in reducing cardiovascular disease risk. These stories caused significant controversy among the science community, with many experts disagreeing with the claims made on the program. Given the large number of people taking statins (an estimated 2.6 million people in Australia) and the potential links with dementia, Dementia News investigated the facts and the latest research findings behind this debate.

Cochrane reviews are systematic reviews of clinical health research undertaken under the auspices of the international Cochrane Collaboration. A Cochrane review requires all relevant published primary research (i.e. studies that have collected data on specific interventions) to be collected, collated, and then assessed using stringent guidelines to establish whether or not there is conclusive evidence to support specific treatments or interventions. Because of this rigorous review process, Cochrane reviews are recognised as the highest standard of evidence available for many clinical and policy related health areas.

Earlier this year a Cochrane review was published which looked into whether statins can prevent cardiovascular disease. Analysing 18 scientific trials that had looked at the benefits and risks of taking statins, it concluded that there was no evidence of any serious harm caused by statin use and more importantly that statins were considered an effective preventative measure against cardiovascular disease. Another review published in Current Opinion in Cardiology in September this year suggested that the benefits of taking statins far outweighed their risks and concluded that they are effective in reducing cardiovascular morbidity and mortality.

Dementia News asked Emily Banks, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at the Australian National University and Chair of the Therapeutic Goods Administration’s Advisory Committee on the Safety of Medicines to provide a comment on the use of statins to prevent cardiovascular disease. She said: “Evidence from a number of large-scale trials shows that statins are effective for reducing cholesterol and for preventing heart attacks and strokes. Their use is especially important in people who already have or are at high risk of cardiovascular disease. Like all medicines, they need to be used according to guidelines and patients should be informed about their risks and benefits. It is important to remember that smoking, high blood pressure and diabetes are also important risk factors for cardiovascular disease and also need to be addressed.”

For more information click on the links below:
Journal Link: Cochrane review
Journal Link: Current Opinion in Cardiology
DEMENTIA AND STATINS

As well as the recent debate about the effectiveness of statins on reducing cardiovascular disease, there are also occasional suggestions in the media that statin use may be related to cognitive impairment or dementia risk. Professor Kaarin Anstey from the Australian National University published a review in 2008 in the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry which established a strong association between high cholesterol and increased dementia risk, suggesting high cholesterol should be treated effectively to reduce dementia risk.

However, in February 2012, the United States Food and Drug Administration amended the safety information on statin medications to state that “statins may have an adverse effect on cognition in a small number of people.” At the time, Alzheimer’s Australia released an official statement found here, stating that there was no evidence that statin use was linked to dementia.

The most recent paper published on this topic was on November 19 of this year, in the Journal Annals of Internal Medicine. The paper reviewed 57 scientific articles reporting on the relationship between statins and brain health. The review concluded that there was no reliable evidence linking statin use with decreased cognitive performance and that some studies had found statin use may in fact reduce the risk of dementia.

Another review, published last month in the Journal, Mayo Clinic Proceedings looked at 16 studies which focused on both the short term (six months) and long term (up to four years) use of statins on brain health. This review concluded that short term use of statins had no effects on cognitive performance, while long term use was associated with a small decrease in dementia risk.

However, both these reviews concluded that there are still many unanswered questions and that more research on the possible links between statins and dementia is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn. It is also unknown whether certain types of statins are more beneficial or riskier than others - for example, a study published this year in the Journal Atherosclerosis stated that only certain types of statins were associated with a reduced risk of dementia but that none appeared to increase dementia risk. We also don’t know whether statins might be a potential therapy for dementia symptoms - a Cochrane review published in April 2012 found only three relevant studies and could not draw any conclusions.

For more information click on the links below:
Journal Link: American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry
Journal Link: Annals of Internal Medicine
Journal Link: Mayo Clinic Proceedings
Journal Link: Atherosclerosis
Journal Link: Cochrane Review
Media Link: Dementia Today

So in conclusion – the current evidence shows that statins reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease for those with high cholesterol, and that they reduce the rate of heart attacks and strokes at the population level. A number of studies also suggest that statins do not interfere with cognitive function, and that they don’t increase and may even decrease the risk of dementia.

As with all medications, it is important to consult with your doctor or other health professional if you have any questions or concerns, and to take medications as they are prescribed. Alzheimer’s Australia recommends using any medications (like statins) in conjunction with a healthy diet and regular exercise. You can find out more about dementia risk reduction at www.yourbrainmatters.org.au.
The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care start their State and Territory consultation forums next week and will hold separate service provider and consumer forums.

Consultation Forum Schedule
- Darwin Thursday, 7 November 2013
- Brisbane Wednesday, 13 November 2013
- Perth Tuesday, 19 November 2013
- Adelaide Thursday, 21 November 2013
- Sydney Tuesday, 26 November 2013
- Melbourne Friday, 29 November 2013
- Hobart Wednesday, 4 December 2013
- Broken Hill Friday, 6 December 2013
- Canberra Tuesday, 10 December 2013

While the service provider numbers are good, the Commission are keen to get better consumer representation. The numbers are apparently low in Darwin next week on Thursday 7 November as we there have been no consumer expression of interests as yet.


Simson Cards generously donates a percentage of card sales to Alzheimer’s Australia Dementia Research Foundation.

Cards can be purchased from Myer, David Jones and selected newsagents.

For more information click here
UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA
FREE ONLINE COURSE

The University of Tasmania’s first Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), Understanding Dementia, is an 11-week online course that builds upon the latest in international research on dementia.

The online course, taught by some of Australia’s leading researchers and clinicians has proven extremely popular, with almost 10,000 people enrolling in the course in 2013.

The curriculum draws upon the expertise of neuroscientists, clinicians and dementia care professionals in the Wicking Dementia Research and Education Centre.

You can express interest in the next offering of Understanding Dementia, scheduled for March 2014.

Visit - www.utas.edu.au/wicking/wca/mooc

CONTACT
Any questions or comments are welcome.
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