1.1 About Alzheimer’s Society

Alzheimer’s Society is the UK’s leading support and research charity for people with dementia, their families and carers. We provide information and support to people with any form of dementia and their carers through our publications National Dementia Helpline, website and our local services. We campaign for better quality of life for people with dementia and greater understanding of dementia. We also fund an innovative programme of medical and social research into the cause, cure and prevention of dementia and the care people receive.

1.2 Why is dementia so important?

Dementia represents a major public health challenge. There are 850,000 people with dementia in the UK in 2015 (Alzheimer’s Society, 2014) and 44 million worldwide (ADI, 2013). These numbers are set to rise, with it anticipated there will be over one million people with dementia in the UK by 2021 and over two million by 2051 if no action is taken and current trends continue (Alzheimer’s Society, 2014). Dementia is progressive and at present there is no cure or practicable tool for pre-symptomatic screening at a population level. Public health must respond to rising numbers of people with dementia both in terms of interventions which may reduce prevalence of dementia and in ensuring those who develop dementia are supported to live well with it.

1.3 What should Public Health’s priorities be for dementia?

Alzheimer’s Society believes public health has five broad roles in relation to dementia:
1) Informing people how to reduce their risk of developing dementia
2) Diagnosing dementia early
3) Supporting people to live well with the condition
4) Enabling dementia friendly communities
5) Monitoring and managing data

While the causes of dementia remain unclear, it is known that a good diet, regular physical exercise, proper management of type 2 diabetes and hypertension, and avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol consumption can reduce someone’s risk of developing dementia. Interventions focusing on encouraging a healthier, more active lifestyle and improved diagnosis and management of type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure would therefore reduce future incidence of dementia. While a lifelong approach to good cardiovascular health is recommended for some conditions (for example high blood pressure, blood cholesterol or BMI), a healthy lifestyle from midlife onwards is likely to be particularly effective at combating dementia.

A clear message of “What's good for your heart is good for your head” is needed to encourage people to take steps to reduce their risk of developing dementia. Existing and future interventions public health interventions and campaigns focusing on physical
exercise, alcohol, smoking or diet should include this message. People diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and hypertension should be made aware of the links to dementia in later life and encouraged to manage their conditions.

In addition to these cardiovascular approaches, psychosocial interventions such as educational attainment, complex work, and mental and social stimulation throughout life also reduce the risk of developing dementia. They are thought to do so by building up a cognitive reserve\(^{iii,iv}\), hence 'use it or lose it'. Growing evidence also suggests that mid-life depression is a probable risk factor for later dementia, and its recognition and treatment should be encouraged.

Emerging evidence\(^{v,vi}\) suggests that the prevalence of dementia may have fallen over the past 20 years, due to efforts made to improve heart health and prevent stroke and heart attacks. However, because the greatest risk factor for dementia is age and people are on average living longer, the number of people living with dementia is still set to rise.

Furthermore, the majority of evidence addresses modifiable aspects of Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia. There is no evidence specifically for other dementia sub-types, such as dementia with Lewy bodies or fronto-temporal dementia.

2.1 The Health Select Committee Inquiry

The four broad topics the Health Select Committee will be looking at in relation to Public Health are addressed below.

2.2 The delivery of public health functions

Alzheimer’s Society recognises the importance of public health delivery, whether this comes from the government or local authorities. We feel that if local authorities are appropriately funded and supported to deliver public health functions they will be able to do so effectively.

It is important local authorities acknowledge the important role they are playing and should prioritise their Public Health role. It is imperative they have strong relationships with the local CCGs so they can, through the Health and Wellbeing Board, devise a joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA). This will enable them to commission services and devise a robust strategy based on local needs. Within this strategy dementia should be prioritised as its prevalence is set to reach 1 million by 2021.

2.3 The effectiveness of local authorities in delivering the envisaged improvements to public health

Local authorities are in a prime position to improve public health outcomes for people with dementia. They should invest in community support services and the development of dementia friendly communities as they have the potential to reduce or delay the need for more intensive acute and long term care. Public health agencies, commissioners and providers should support the development of dementia friendly communities and work closely with commissioners of community support services to ensure people affected by dementia have access to the support they need.
Public health agencies should be seeking to collate existing data on dementia and encourage better and more consistent collection of data to allow better understanding of prevalence and the experience of those affected. Key to this would be the establishment of national public health observatories on dementia in each UK country, which would be beneficial both for service planning and also for supporting dementia research.

Locally, those responsible for public health services should ensure dementia is recognised in needs assessments and commissioning. Interventions and campaigns should focus on the areas above; helping people understand how to reduce their risk of developing dementia, supporting early diagnosis, promoting support in the community, enabling the developing of dementia friendly communities and managing data on dementia.

Local authorities contribute towards improving the public’s health in many other areas – such as transport, education, planning, housing and leisure. These should be designed and planned with people affected by dementia in mind.

A clear message of “What’s good for your heart is good for your head” is needed to encourage people to take steps to reduce their risk of developing dementia. Existing and future interventions public health interventions and campaigns focussing on physical exercise, alcohol, smoking or diet should include this message.

In addition to these vascular approaches, psychosocial interventions such as educational attainment, complex work, and mental and social stimulation throughout life also reduce the risk of developing dementia. They are thought to do so by building up a cognitive reserve hence ‘use it or lose it’. This should be publicised to local residents by public health agencies and local authorities.

2.4 The public health workforce

Public health at a strategic level, and the public health workforce at an operational level, should be playing their part in the implementation of the Prime Minister’s 2020 challenge on dementia. The Prime Minister wants England to be, by 2020:

- the best country in the world for dementia care and support and for people with dementia, their carers and families to live;
- the best place in the world to undertake research into dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases..

We believe that staff with a responsibility for public health, wherever they work and whatever their role, should receive training about dementia. Flexibility to work effectively and in partnership across organisational boundaries is particularly important for people with dementia whose needs span diverse organisations, professions, settings and universal services.
2.5 Public health spending

The announcement of £200million worth of cuts to the non-NHS spend of the Department of Health in June 2015 will impact on local government as these cuts refer to Public Health. Ultimately this will impact what local authorities are able to offer for people with dementia and which preventative services they are able to invest in.

As prevention can help to reduce costs associated with long term conditions, which typically use 70% of NHS budget, it is worrying that cuts have been announced in this area. By investing in campaigns such as “what’s good for your heart is good for your head” poor vascular health could be reduced which in turn can reduce the risk of certain dementias. As dementia costs the economy £26.3 million per year it would be beneficial for Public Health agencies to be doing all they can to reduce the risk factors associated with dementia.

NICE have stated that “public health interventions are a good use of public money” which should support local authorities when they are presenting their case for preventative services.

Furthermore, by protecting funding for prevention Public Health can ensure local authorities are able to meet their requirement of the Care Act which states they must ‘contribute to the prevention or delay of the development by adults in its area of needs for care and support or the development by carers in its area of needs for support’. This is an important duty which should not be ignored by Public Health.

3. Conclusion

Alzheimer’s Society calls for
- Local authorities and public health agencies should ensure that they recognise dementia as the public health challenge it is
- Existing and future public health messaging around exercise, smoking, diet and alcohol should include messaging of “what’s good for your heart is good for your head.”
- Public health agencies and local authorities should promote early diagnosis of dementia.
- Public health agencies and local authorities should work closely with other commissioners and services to ensure people with dementia have access to community support services.
- Public health agencies and local authorities should play a leading role supporting the development of dementia friendly communities
- Public health agencies should collate existing data and encourage better collection of data on dementia through establishing public health observatories on dementia.

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