

Early diagnosis in general practice key to tackling growing dementia caseload

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More than 53,000 people are affected by dementia in New Zealand. A South Island programme promoting awareness about dementia to primary care practitioners is aiming to boost the role of general practice in referring patients to support services.

Primary Care Dementia Education Project coordinators in Canterbury have been working since May with GPs and practice nurses to highlight the importance of early diagnosis of dementia.

Coordinator Rebecca Winsor says feedback so far has been positive from GPs, who agree there is a need for education on Alzheimer's and dementia.

Disease on the rise

Dementia is the fourth leading cause of death in New Zealanders over the age of 65. More than 53,000 people are affected by the disease in New Zealand. By 2050 that number will have nearly tripled to more than 147,000, according to the updated Dementia Economic Report 2012. Alzheimer's makes up about 60 per cent of all dementias.



Rebecca Winsor

"Numbers are expected to double every 20 years," Ms Winsor told New Zealand Doctor.

The 12-month project stemmed from the recommendations of the Ministry of Health's NZ Framework for Dementia Care report in 2013. It's also aligned with the South Island Alliance's Cognitive Impairment Pathway that began in August, says Ms Winsor.

"There's evidence that people with dementia will benefit from early diagnosis, so they can be involved in their care and plan for the future," she says. "Early diagnosis also minimises stigma – people can live well with dementia."

Promoting diagnoses in primary care

Diagnosis of dementia has traditionally come from secondary care. "We're trying to encourage that diagnosis to come from primary care, except for complex cases," Ms Winsor says.

The project, funded through the South Island Alliance, Health of Older Person's Group, delivers GPs and practice nurses advice on cognitive testing and driving assessments. Training materials and education packages will be available around the end of the year.

"We are also creating more of an interface between primary, secondary and specialist services, and arranging opportunities for conversations between different groups to work out how they can work together a bit more closely to support each other," says Ms Winsor.

Support services vital

The project coordinators are also developing a group representing different organisations from around the South Island.

Support services are important in the treatment of dementia, with evidence emerging that remaining socially engaged and active are just as effective as medication, says Alzheimer's Canterbury manager Darral Campbell.

GPs and people in the community have differing awareness of the support that is available to people with dementia and their families, Ms Campbell says.

GPs reluctant to refer

She often hears reports that GPs are reluctant to refer patients to services in the early-to-mid stages of dementia, and that patients can resist support services as part of the stigma of having the disease.



Darral Campbell

"More often than not GPs haven't got a good understanding of what it is we offer. We want GPs to have a notion that there are many things that work equally well as medication to support people with dementia. These things are also cheaper."

According to Alzheimer's Support, the estimated cost of dementia in New Zealand is \$712.9 million a year.

Timing of referrals is important

Ms Campbell says GPs used to refer dementia patients to support services as they were going into care, which was too late. "There is a lot of attention given to the end-stage of dementia but the reality is most people spend most of their time with dementia in the community, and not in care.

"We want to say to GPs that we can't cure it but patients can live well with it."

Support services offered by Alzheimer's Canterbury, which also covers the West Coast district, range from therapeutic interventions with a cognitive focus to working in partnership with community groups.

Some of the activities offered include memory groups, art appreciation in art galleries, book groups in libraries, water activities at community pools and volunteer gardening in botanical gardens.

The services, part of the two-year Respite Activity Pilot Programme, are being assessed by Susan Gee, lead researcher from the Psychiatry of Old Age Unit at Canterbury DHB. The pilot received \$45,000 for its first 12 months from the Rata Foundation.

New thinking on preventing dementia

Traditional recommendations of a healthy diet, exercise and no alcohol or tobacco are now considered insufficient to prevent dementia, says Ms Campbell. "Doing crosswords and puzzles are not enough, either."

Working out the brain - "making it puff" - by learning a new instrument or language, is key to keeping the brain healthy.

She says at the Alzheimer's Disease International conference in Puerto Rico last year starting lifestyle preventions as early as possible was discussed.

"It's what we do between 30 and 50 years of age that has the most impact on whether we'll get dementia or not."

