

Business case for a national dementia strategy compelling

We must tackle dementia collectively and deliberately. Our economic prosperity depends on it just as much as those we hold dear to us.

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Until my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I had little experience with the disease. Over these past five years, I have seen a once-vigorous and energetic woman now crushed and entirely lost to us. Almost as heartbreaking is seeing my 94-year-old father reduced to tears so many times at the loss of his loving wife and at his helplessness in dealing with it.

Dementia's toll on women is harsh. Women represent 72 per cent of Canadians living with Alzheimer's disease and 70 per cent of Canadians providing personal care for those they love.

For my mother and so many others, there is no escape from the relentless progression of the disease. For caregivers like my father, my family, and so many other families, the frustrations and demands of care are life-changing.

Alzheimer's impact goes beyond individuals and families. It affects the country as a whole, further straining our health-care system as Canadians grow older with fewer children to care for them.

When we take a hard look at the projections, we see a strong business case for making Alzheimer's disease and dementia a public health priority.

We still have no cure nor do we fully understand its causes or have effective prevention and treatments. Dementia can strike people as young as 40 but occurs mostly in those 65 onward. Over a quarter of us will be 65 or older by 2036 according to Statistics Canada projections.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada estimates that the numbers of Canadians with dementia will more than double from 747,000 today, to 1.4 million in less than 20 years. For every person with dementia, there are two or more family members providing direct care. In 2011 alone, these caregivers spent 444 million unpaid hours providing care for family members with dementia. In economic terms, this represents \$11-billion in lost income and 230,000 full-time jobs. In 25 years, caregivers will be providing 1.4 billion unpaid hours of care, an increase of 300 percent.

Dementia limits our productivity as a workforce and deals a tremendous economic blow to our public-health system. Canada will spend \$293-billion per year on this disease by 2040.

Can we afford these crippling costs? Can we afford to lose the productivity of so many working Canadians cut short because of this disease or limited by their care-giving responsibilities?

The answer is that we can't.

As someone who has built a business, the argument for taking action to head off these costs is compelling. At a meeting of provincial and territorial health ministers held last fall, Health Minister Rona Ambrose stated that she and her counterparts would work together on a national dementia strategy. This is a promising start. We now need to turn this political sentiment into government action.

The Alzheimer Society of Canada's solution is to create a Canadian Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia Partnership, and it is urging the Government of Canada to invest \$30-million per year over five years, for a total of \$150-million, to establish this. The society's proposal would bring together researchers, health-care providers, community and industry leaders, all levels of governments, Alzheimer Societies and people living with dementia and caregivers from across Canada. This group would lead, develop and implement a comprehensive, integrated national dementia strategy guided by five key objectives:

- Increase research investment and improve data sharing and collection;
- Improve supports for family caregivers;
- Ensure better care coordination;
- Enhance training of health-care providers;
- Create more awareness and brain health promotion, and reduce stigma.

The plan makes sense to me. Investing in this partnership represents just \$1 per Canadian per year for a disease that is already costing our economy over \$1,000 per person every year. On the other side of the ledger are the many billions of dollars in projected costs to cope with dementia over the next 25 years.

Good work is already underway across the country. We have the resources, talent and expertise to change the course of dementia for our families, communities and for Canada. The Canadian Alzheimer's Disease and Dementia Partnership will provide much-needed personal, political and policy oversight to reduce the punishing toll of this disease.

As I watch my mother drift deeper into her disease, I'm reminded that we must never lose sight of what these statistics really represent—thousands of other mothers like mine, wives, husbands, and friends, and every family member and friend who is caring for them.

We must tackle dementia collectively and deliberately. Our economic prosperity depends on it just as much as those we hold dear to us.

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