National strategy needed to defuse dementia ‘time bomb’

Unless we start defusing the dementia time bomb, this disease will be the greatest threat to our economy, to our country’s productivity and to our quality of life.

The impact of dementia on individuals is devastating and well understood by those who have it and their friends and families. What is less well-known is the impact it has on the economic well-being of every Canadian and the country as a whole.

For every one of the 747,000 Canadians with dementia, there are usually two or more family members providing some form of personal care. In 2011, Canadians spent 444 million unpaid hours providing care to family members living with dementia. It amounts to an estimated $11 billion in lost income and the equivalent of almost 230,000 full-time jobs. By 2031 the number of Canadians battling the debilitating effects of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease—the most common form of dementia—is projected to hit 1.4 million. That’s nearly double the number of Canadians who currently have the disease.

By 2040, Canadian caregivers will be providing 1.4 billion hours of care to loved ones with dementia.

At the same time as it limits our nation’s productivity, the economic toll dementia exacts on our public health system is enormous. Canada will spend $293-billion per year on dementia by 2040. How then do we respond to this rising tide of economic and social costs? By bringing together a partnership of dementia experts, government officials, health-care providers, researchers and Canadians impacted by the disease to establish and implement an integrated, comprehensive national strategic plan. Similar to the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the society is recommending the creation of an arms-length, not-for-profit organization to spearhead the strategy. We propose calling it the Canadian Alzheimer’s disease and dementia partnership.

The partnership and the strategy are needed to strengthen the integration and coordination of dementia care across the country, recognize family caregiver needs and develop supports to help them, increase investment in research and improve knowledge exchange among service providers. A vital part of the strategy would also be the development of a surveillance system to better detect Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia as early as possible so that we can help people with dementia and their families to better cope with the disease.

We need to do a much better job of ensuring that, at every stage of the disease, people with dementia receive appropriate care provided by skilled and well-informed, well-trained professionals, and are treated with dignity and respect. People with dementia deserve more support so they can remain in their homes longer and continue to contribute to their communities.

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Mimi Lowi-Young is CEO of the Alzheimer Society of Canada, the leading not-for-profit health organization working nationwide to improve the quality of life for Canadians affected by Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias. She has more than 30 years of experience as a senior health-care leader, leading systems and organizational transformation and renewal in all sectors of the health system.

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