

The Malta Dementia Society

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The patterns of illness that accompany old age have profound social and economic consequences for society as a whole and for healthcare systems in particular. Dementia is a serious, common, and rapidly growing world-wide neurological condition associated with increased healthcare utilisation. It is the major predictor of morbidity and mortality in the elderly.

Dementia is a generic term that describes chronic or progressive dysfunction of brain areas resulting in complex cognitive decline. These cognitive changes are commonly accompanied by disturbances of mood, behaviour, and personality. The condition affects about 1.5% of individuals at the age of 65 years and doubles every four years to reach about 30% at 80 years. Overall incidence increases with age and

is about 1% per year and is low in men and in people of African and Asian origin. Differences in rates of dementia between developing and developed countries are difficult to explain, but might be attributable partly to the difficulties in dementia diagnosis in areas with high rates of illiteracy, and survival bias due to high death rates at all age groups. Dementia patients have a substantially shortened life

expectancy with an average survival time-span being around 8 years from diagnosis.

Different forms of dementia are now distinguished; Alzheimer's disease (accounting to around 50-60 % of all cases), vascular dementia, dementia with Lewy bodies, frontotemporal dementia, and dementia secondary to disease, such as dementia due to AIDS. Other forms of dementia include those due to vitamin deficiency, drug intoxication, alcoholism and endocrine disorders. Although the importance of accurate diagnosis is clear, this may prove to be difficult as different dementias are believed to have common underlying neuropathology. Albeit fundamental research have identified some of the neurochemical and neurobiological changes that occur in the various forms of dementia, much remains to be done in the area of disease management and the development of appropriate models of long-term care.

Extensive exploration of the possible risk factors, which has largely focused on Alzheimer's disease, has been disappointing. Age, dementia in a first-degree family member, and a history of head trauma are some of the confirmed risk factors for the disease. In vascular dementia, the main risk factors identified are age, male sex, hypertension, myocardial infarction, coronary heart disease, diabetes, smoking, hyperlipidaemia, and a history of stroke. The challenge to researchers in this field is to determine the relative importance of individual risk factors and their interactive effects. Other promising research avenues are yet to be explored. These include further development of neuroimaging and other biological marker techniques for diagnosis and monitoring, wider assessment of treatments for behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia and strategies to support care.

The Malta Dementia Society was established in September 2004 on the occasion of World Alzheimer's Day. The society is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), intended primarily for people with dementia and their caregivers, families and friends but which also brings together healthcare professionals and other interested persons wishing to learn more

about the various aspects of dementia and its care.

The prime focus throughout the first year and a half of the society was to provide information and to raise awareness about dementia. Hence, caregivers were invited to a series of talks and video presentations discussing challenging behaviour and how to organise a daily routine for people with dementia. These activities were received with great interest and enthusiasm, and subsequently had to be repeated on several occasions. Information about the society and membership application leaflets have now been produced and a website has been set up to provide details of the society and its work. The website can be accessed at www.maltadementiasociety.org.mt

A public lecture entitled "What is Dementia?" was presented in July 2005 by Dr Carmelo Aquilina, a Consultant in Old Age Psychiatry at the Royal Betlem Hospital, Kent, UK.

The society's first anniversary was celebrated in September 2005 with a 'Memory Walk' – a public awareness campaign that was held at Freedom Square,

Valletta. Many members and friends joined together at this event, to meet the general public and to disseminate information about dementia. During this activity, members challenged the stigma that is associated with this disease by bravely parading up and down in Republic Street with banners such as "Dementia is not just getting older" and "There are 3500 people with Dementia in Malta". The 'Memory Walk' received good publicity thanks to the interest and support of the local media.

Strong international networking is maintained with Alzheimer Europe and the society has recently been elected as provisional member of Alzheimer's Disease International. The society also had

discussions with the local authorities about increasing services such as establishing Specialised Day Care Centres specifically for people with dementia.

The Malta Dementia Society has collaborated with private nursing homes to deliver talks to staff on dementia care. Recently the society has teamed up with the Continuing Education Committee at St. Vincent de Paul Residence to set up a training course in Person-centred Dementia Care for staff working at this long stay residence for the elderly. It is hoped that by being involved in staff training, the society will have an influence on raising the standards of care to people with dementia in Malta.

Contact Info

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Upcoming Meeting

The Malta Dementia Society is organising an evening lecture:

100 years of Alzheimer's Disease

delivered by **Dr Carmelo Aquilina MD FRCPsych**
Consultant in Old Age Psychiatry, Royal Betlem Hospital, Kent, UK

Tuesday, 18 July 2006
starting at 08:00pm

At the Conference Hall, Medical School, St Luke's Hospital, Gwardamangia

A certificate of attendance for CME accreditation will be provided

This meeting is eligible for accreditation with the Malta College of Pharmacy Practice.
Proof of attendance must be produced.