

Alzheimer's Society Annual Conference Speech

May 2024



As I look around this room, I know I am talking this morning to an audience of experts.

You are people who know so much about dementia as a disease – or group of diseases; you know about the science; you know about caring for people with dementia; some of you are experts because you are living with dementia.

And knowing what you know about dementia, and how cruel it can be, could make this a gloomy day. But actually, I don't think it will be.

Not just because I know from experience working with some of you, that you are extraordinary and determined – and will put on a brave face and confront the day whatever it brings.

But because we are at a moment of time for dementia when – at last – we have genuine, good reasons for optimism. You will know how bleak some of the statistics are. Not least because I know the brilliant Chief Medical Officer went through some of his famous slides earlier this morning.

You'll know the prediction that one in three people born in the UK today will be diagnosed with dementia. And that half of us will be directly affected by dementia in our lifetime – either with our own diagnosis, or because someone close to us will be diagnosed. And by 2040, 1.6 million people will be living with dementia.

When we talk about statistics, I always remind myself of what that means in human terms. We are talking about mums and dads, grans and grandads, husbands, wives, partners, siblings, friends. But I know that CMO also shared good reasons for hope – the fact that we can reduce the risk of dementia, the potential to delay the disease and the progress being made on treatments.

Many of you will know about Carol Jennings, who became Vice-President of the Alzheimer's Society in 2023, alongside her husband Stuart. In the 1980s, Carol saw what dementia was doing to her family. Her father and his siblings had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and she urged doctors to look into her family history with the disease.

The subsequent discovery of a genetic mutation contributed to groundbreaking research and diagnostic testing.

Sadly, Carol passed away earlier this year, and my thoughts are with Stuart, and all her family and friends. But her mission can still inspire us. And give us hope in the potential of science to help us beat this devastating disease.

The mission

We need that hope. Because the predictions can be disheartening. Indeed, deeply worrying – not just in terms of human impact but also in terms of costs for our health and social care system. But – they are just predictions.

I became an MP because I wanted to make things different – better. Because the future doesn't have to be like the past – or even follow the path that it seems to be on.

We can change the future. And I believe we will look back at this time and see it as a pivotal moment. A fork in the road. Where we took a different path.

This morning I want to talk about how we are going to follow that different path.

Firstly, we must continue to invest in care to ensure dignity and compassion for everyone living with dementia.

Alongside that, we must redouble our efforts on prevention, encouraging good health and good brain health, and improving early diagnoses to support people at risk.

And we must drive forwards our commitment to research together with – and this is an exciting point – making sure we are ready to deploy new dementia treatments.

But first, I want to say thank you. Thank you to all of you for the part you are playing in the battle with dementia. Take our host, Bill Wilson.

Bill, your blogs have eloquently shared not only the challenge getting a diagnosis can all too often be, but also the benefits that diagnosis can bring, and the grief of losing someone you love to dementia. So, thank you – your words have given comfort to many.

Whether you're a doctor, a nurse, a researcher, a care professional, a fund raiser, a volunteer, or an unpaid carer – I appreciate everything you do, and so do thousands of families.

Progress so far

I know there is a lot of work ahead of us – but look how far we have already come, to get where we are today.

Fourteen years ago, a British Prime Minister put dementia at the centre of the global public health agenda. In fact – as we'll likely hear a lot more talk in the months ahead about what has happened in the last 14 years – I hope you will allow me this... it was a Conservative Prime Minister.

David Cameron hosted the world's first G8 dementia summit – which mobilised leading economies to put collective shoulders to the wheel. He talked the talk on the global stage – and followed through here at home. Spending on dementia doubled in that parliament.

And again in 2019 we committed to doubling spending on dementia research during the Parliament – which we are on track to do.

But there's also the here and now – and the progress we are making for people living with dementia. David recognised that – and his Challenge on Dementia 2020 gave a million care workers and a million NHS workers dementia awareness training. In fact, it was as part of his challenge that I did dementia awareness training as a new MP in Faversham. Because living your life to the fullest possible matters whoever you are, and whatever you are battling with – including when you're battling with dementia.

That's one reason why getting a dementia diagnosis is important even in advance of treatments; because then you can be helped to get the right care and support.

And this is another area of progress; in 2020 we reached the target of a 66.7% dementia diagnosis rate. I know the pandemic knocked this back – but even in the face of all the post pandemic pressures, I've been determined to see us get that diagnosis rate back on track.

And if you've seen this year's NHS England planning guidance, you'll have seen that getting back up to 66.7% is a priority for this financial year.

Also in primary care, we have expanded the Additional Roles Reimbursement Scheme to include enhanced nurses. This means GPs in primary care networks can employ a dementia specialist nurse funded by the NHS centrally.

So that more people living with dementia, across more parts of the country, can benefit from the support of a dementia specialist nurse.

Social care

Now, as care minister, I know the importance of social care for people with dementia – and their carers.

Thousands of people with dementia rely on our adult social care services today, and thousands more will in the future. That's one reason why social care is so important.

And knowing that, we've put extra funding into social care – up to £8.6 billion extra funding for local authorities to use for social care over last year and this year.

And we've embarked on ambitious reforms for the care workforce. Because care is all about people. I'm determined to make sure care workers get the recognition they

deserve as skilled professionals...often looking after people with really complex health conditions and care needs.

Where skills matter, as well as compassion and consistency.

That's why we're investing in training for our care workforce, with a new nationally accredited qualification on the way, and a new – the first ever – national career structure for care workers, the Care Workforce Pathway. So just as people embark on a career in the NHS, so you will be able to embark on a career on social care.

We're also driving innovation in social care. For instance, replacing paper care records with digital ones.

Which is not only more efficient – it also means better, safer care. For instance, digital care records can alert GPs if their patient needs medical treatment, or alert staff if medication has been missed. And with permission, family carers can see the records too and be safe in the knowledge that all is well – which I know can be really important to families of people living with dementia.

The Future

But now – back to the future.

I know this morning, along with the statistics, CMO shared good reasons for hope: we can reduce the risk of dementia and delay the disease; and progress is being made on new treatments. With this in mind, as CMO said, up to a third of dementia cases could be prevented or delayed.

So we are focussing on prevention as well as the cure. Dementia has been added to the NHS Health Check programme, identifying early signs of dementia risk in adults in England aged 45 to 74.

We are supporting local authorities to improve uptake of the NHS Health Check, and investing £17 million into developing and rolling out our innovative digital NHS Health check. And prevention is a big strand in our Major Conditions Strategy, which will be published this summer.

We have seen the enormous potential that blood tests have to accelerate diagnosis for so many diseases, and now we need to see this same step-change in dementia. I know that, in partnership with government, the Alzheimer's Society is doing a huge amount of great work in this area...funding research on blood biomarkers that could supercharge diagnosis, and helping to generate the evidence needed for them to be used in the NHS within the next 5 years.

Fast diagnosis is even more imperative if new disease modifying treatments currently being assessed by the regulators are approved for use in the NHS. Because these are most effective for people in the earliest stages of Alzheimer's Disease.

This brings me on to research into treatments – and specifically our ambition to be the world's leading country for deploying new treatments. In a historic breakthrough, new drugs like lecanemab and donanemab have the potential to change the course of Alzheimer's disease.

We need to be clear sighted about the challenges still ahead – this is early days for these kinds of treatments. But this is a source of immense hope for millions of families. And it could be the first step towards managing Alzheimer's as a chronic disease, something you can live with rather than a life sentence.

Introducing these treatments would be a huge step change for the NHS as well as for patients. I know the Alzheimer's Society has expressed concerns about the NHS's readiness to adopt these treatments, and we have listened.

While NICE is appraising lecanemab and donanemab, NHS England is working at pace and in lockstep with regulators to ensure that they are ready to roll them out if they are approved. They have already established a dedicated programme team that is preparing for the implementation challenges, like the need for more and different diagnostic capacity.

I want you to know that as Ministers we will hold the NHS to account for ensuring these medicines, if approved, reach patients.

To Conclude

Finally, I want to reiterate the importance of continued investment in dementia research.

Since 2017, we have spent over £500 million on dementia research.

As I've set out, there is hope for future treatments. Future treatments which will be developed with the help of dedicated researchers and clinicians, and people like Carol Jennings.

This audience knows better than anyone the challenges we face. This is a marathon, not a sprint – and we are thinking in decades. But there is hope on the horizon.

And as we get there together, we need to make sure people living with dementia and their families can play a full part in our society.

They are people, not just patients – who should have the opportunity to live their lives to the full, to bring joy to our lives, and maybe, one day, to recover. Dementia may be a formidable opponent, but we are a powerful force. And I am confident we can overcome it.

So, let's join forces, amplify our voices, and create a world where dementia no longer devastates lives.

Thank you all very much.