Dementia: Where do we stand?

- The proportion of older people in the population is increasing in almost every country. By 2050, around 2 billion people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. The transition to older populations will challenge society in many ways. Health in older age will be a crucial determinant of where the balance will lie between the costs and benefits associated with population ageing. Although dementia mainly affects older people, it is not a normal part of ageing. Dementia is one of the major causes of disability and dependency among older people worldwide. It is a burden and overwhelming not only for the individual who has dementia, but also for their caregivers, families and society as a whole. There is often a lack of awareness and understanding of dementia, resulting in stigmatization and barriers to diagnosis and care.

- Today, more than 35 million people are living with dementia, including 60% living in low- and middle-income countries. There are almost 8 million new cases of dementia each year, or one new case of dementia somewhere in the world every four seconds. Numbers are expected to double by 2030 and more than triple by 2050. More than 115 million people in the world will live with dementia in 2050 – the majority of this increase will be witnessed in low- and middle-income countries.

- The need for long-term care for people with dementia strains health and social systems, and budgets. The estimated worldwide cost of dementia is estimated to have been US$ 604 billion in 2010. The catastrophic cost of care traps millions of people in chronic poverty.

- No treatments are currently available to cure or even alter the progressive course of dementia, although many new therapies are being investigated in various stages of clinical trials. There is, however, much that can be offered immediately to support and improve the lives of people with dementia and their caregivers and families.

Which policies and programmes will best drive progress moving forward?

- The principal goals for dementia prevention and care are:
  - Ensuring early diagnosis
  - Optimising physical health, cognition, activity and well-being
  - Detecting and treating behavioural and psychological symptoms
  - Providing information and long-term support to caregivers.

- The principal goals for finding a cure, or a disease-modifying therapy, for dementia are:
– Developing a prioritized research agenda involving major relevant constituencies
– Increasing public investments in research relevant to dementia
– Improving the incentives for private investment in innovation related to dementia, including optimising the path of drugs from research to the market
– Encouraging international cooperation, establishing networks and strengthening the national capacity to conduct research
– Encouraging WHO Collaborating Centres to incorporate research into their plans and facilitate collaborative research through bilateral and multilateral collaboration and multicentre projects.

How do we build a global road map to support national efforts?

■ In September 2011, Heads of State and Government acknowledged at the United Nations General Assembly that “mental and neurological disorders, including Alzheimer’s disease, are an important cause of morbidity and contribute to the global noncommunicable disease burden, for which there is a need to provide equitable access to effective programmes and health-care interventions”.

■ Accordingly, the WHO report "Dementia: A public health priority", published in 2012 with the support from NGO Alzheimer’s Disease International, sets out the world’s current understanding of dementia and its impact on individuals, families and society. It called on governments to recognize their primary role and responsibility in responding to the challenge of dementia and the need for the efforts and engagement of all sectors of society to generate effective responses for the cure and care of dementia. It also called on governments to include dementia as an integral part on their national public health agendas and in related investment decisions, as well as to formulate policies, plans and laws, and improve care services.

■ To explore ways to build an international effort to promote coordinated action against dementia, the UK hosted the G8 Dementia Summit on 11 December 2013, with the participation from Ministers, researchers, pharmaceutical companies and charities. The Summit concluded with the publication of a declaration and communique calling for greater innovation to improve the quality of life for people with dementia and their caregivers, while reducing the emotional and financial burden. It also set an ambition to identify a cure, or a disease-modifying therapy, for dementia by 2025. Follow-up discussions are ongoing through the UK Department of Health-led Global Action Against Dementia programme. The G7 countries have been coordinating a series of legacy events to explore new models for increasing investment in dementia research, as well as care and prevention, and partnership between academia and industry.

■ To analyse how systems and caring policies need to adapt, how to accelerate innovation in dementia care, how to prioritise dementia research investments, and the role that “big data” can play in improving dementia research and care, WHO and OECD are currently leading a series of actions aimed at supporting national efforts to adapt health systems.

1 See paragraph 18 of resolution A/RES/66/2
2 Available at http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/75263/1/9789241564458_eng.pdf?ua=1
3 Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g8-dementia-summit-agreements
To support countries in their national efforts to recognize dementia as a public health priority and to take action, WHO will host the first Ministerial Conference on Global Action Against Dementia from 3 to 4 March 2015 in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Conference will be supported by OECD and the UK Department of Health.

What will the Conference aim to achieve?

Goal:

To raise political awareness that a world free of the avoidable carer burden of dementia is achievable, but only if governments in rich and poor countries alike follow a shared commitment to put in place the necessary policies and resources for dementia care and finding a cure for dementia, and place action against dementia higher on the national and global political agendas.

Objectives:

To highlight evidence relating to the global burden and impact of dementia on health and socio-economic outcomes

To encourage governments worldwide to take action to prevent dementia and improve care services, based on current scientific knowledge, available evidence and global experience

To discuss the importance of measuring dementia care and monitoring progress

To emphasise the need for increased investment in research

To review global actions undertaken between 2011 and 2014 and explore possibilities of supporting global cooperation and to move from commitment to action.

Expected outcome:

The Conference will result in increased awareness of the public health challenge posed by dementia, a better understanding of governments’ primary role and responsibility in responding to the challenge of dementia, and the platform to define the need for coordinated global and national action.

When will the Conference take place and who will participate?

The Conference will take place on Tuesday 3 and Wednesday 4 March 2015 at the WHO Executive Board Room at WHO’s Headquarters located at 20 Avenue Appia, Geneva, Switzerland.

The Conference will take place with the participation from Ministers of Health. National focal points for dementia care and research are encouraged to accompany their Ministers.
United Nations organizations and other international organizations, as well as international development agencies, WHO Collaborating Centres, NGOs in official relations with WHO, other relevant NGOs, philanthropic foundations, and selected private sector entities will be able to observe the proceedings.

Leading technical experts on dementia from around the world will also be invited to attend.

What will the agenda look like?

The Conference will provide an opportunity to summarise the global situation and burden due to dementia, identify problems and challenges to tackle the situation, recognize current initiatives, and position opportunities for action to raise dementia as a priority on international and national agendas.

The first day of the Conference will encourage technical discussions among national focal points and experts from academia. The theme for the first day is “dementia care today and cure tomorrow”. Suggested topics for discussion include:
  – dementia prevention
  – care innovation
  – systems and policy strengthening
  – integrated drug development
  – increasing and prioritising dementia research investments
  – information and data sharing and networks.

The second day will encourage political discussions among Ministers. The theme for the second day is “moving forward with action”. Sessions will be organized around:
  – How to integrate dementia into public health/prevention planning and national development plans and policies?
  – How to strengthen innovation and develop a cure for dementia?
  – How to explore the provision of adequate, predictable and sustained resources for dementia, through domestic, bilateral, regional and multilateral channels?
  – How to strengthen international cooperation on dementia within the framework of North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation for dementia?
  – How to include dementia in development cooperation agendas and initiatives, internationally agreed development goals, and economic development policies?

To provoke discussions during the Conference, WHO will publish a discussion paper closer to the Conference.

Interpretation will be provided in WHO official languages.

The Conference will be webcasted over the internet.

How to receive more information?

For more information and communicating interest in participating, please contact: Dr Shekhar Saxena, Director, Department for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO Email: saxenas@who.int