

Defeating dementia: progress and challenges on the road to 2025

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Speech by

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To get a sense of the challenge that dementia poses, I think about a man who, as a celebrated writer, gave such a clear account of the impact of dementia and stood determined not to let it stop him living his life.

Sir Terry Pratchett was a best-selling author of some of the most creative fantasy novels. He continued to write despite his diagnosis of dementia and would not let it stop him. In his words:

“It’s possible to live well with dementia. And write best-sellers. Like wot I do.”

There is not yet a cure, and as Terry himself described it:

“There is no clearly plotted pathway to the course of these diseases. Dementia attacks those facets which make us who we are, and it’s a deeply personal attack that defies prediction.”

Today we know much more about the challenge that dementia poses. But what are we doing to meet this challenge?

What have we achieved since the summit here in London in 2013, 5 years ago? Have we done enough to tackle stigma and raise awareness of this disease? Are we doing the research that will help us develop a treatment? Are we helping people to live well with dementia?

Today we’re gathered in London again, 5 years on from David Cameron using the UK’s presidency of the G8 summit to turn the spotlight on dementia.

Here we have a selection of the people who, working together in a common purpose, can bring change in our organisations, our countries and our world. We have eminent scientists, policy makers, innovators, academia, industry, people with dementia and carers, and politicians too. These are just some of the people that we need to bring together.

Without working across boundaries, without the collaborations and sharing of ideas we would not be able to make progress.

Today I want to reflect on some of the achievements we've made home and abroad. Let us together renew the call for action to defeat dementia.

In the UK alone, an estimated 850,000 live with dementia, with numbers projected to rise to over 1 million by 2022 and 2 million by 2051.

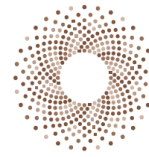
225,000 people will develop dementia this year, that's roughly 1 every 3 minutes. And an estimated 1 in 5 people over the age of 85 have dementia. Furthermore, there are over 45,000 people under the age of 65 living with dementia in the UK.

Numbers are rising now. As we make progress in tackling the other major killers, then the numbers will rise more so.

Globally, nearly 50 million people were living with dementia in 2017. Research commissioned by Alzheimer's Disease International highlights that the global cost of dementia will double by 2030, to \$2 trillion.

I want to talk about what we are doing in 4 areas:

- care and treatment
- early diagnosis
- prevention
- technology



On care and treatment, we have made significant progress on staff training to help them care for people with dementia better. This year we reached one million NHS staff receiving dementia training since 2013 and around a million social care staff will have learned about dementia.

And we are investing in dementia research for better care approaches and new treatments. To that end, we are spending £300 million on dementia research between 2015 and 2020.

Through the Dementia Research Institute, Dementia Platforms UK, and through international efforts such as the Dementia Discovery Fund – which stands at a staggering £250 million so far – we are creating an environment to develop new approaches to tackling dementia.

On diagnosis, one of our central achievements has been the improvement in the dementia diagnosis rate. Today, over two-thirds of people living with dementia receive a diagnosis, compared with 2 in 5 in 2010 to 2011.

A timely diagnosis enables an individual and their loved ones to think about the care and support they need. It means they are able to access support and receive treatment quicker.

But things move on. As the science improves we are now thinking about even earlier diagnosis informed by understanding of ‘biomarkers’ to ensure that novel medicines and treatments stand the best chance of success.

On prevention, there is growing recognition that brain health is just as important as heart health: dementia isn’t an inevitable consequence of ageing. Around one-third of Alzheimer’s disease cases may be preventable through improving lifestyle, especially in midlife.

That is why we now have dementia messages in our NHS health checks. In England everyone between the ages 40 to 74 years who goes for a health check will be given advice on how to reduce their dementia risk.

In the last 5 years, 7 million people attended a health check. That’s a fantastic opportunity to get the message out.

Which brings me to the role of technology. Since 2013 we have a deeper understanding of how technology can transform the lives of those with dementia and their carers.

Launched by the University of Oxford and the Alzheimer's Society, the 'GameChanger' app contains a collection of memory and thinking games that test specific parts of the brain as well as the memory and thinking abilities believed to be affected during the early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

A fantastic example of using new technology is the Dementia Education and Learning Through Stimulation 2 (DEALTS) programme, which uses virtual reality to help staff understand the challenges someone living with dementia faces in their everyday lives, from shopping to going to the cinema.

Or Paro the robotic seal. Paro uses artificial intelligence to learn from its surroundings and interact with people. Soft and cuddly, yes. And studies show its potential as a therapeutic intervention for people with dementia – it has been shown to improve socialisation for people living with dementia.

In all these areas, there are examples of good progress. It will take time. But there are still things we can do now. We are seeing a change in the way people think, talk and act on dementia.

The Dementia Friends initiative has been successful in raising awareness. We have over 2.7 million people who have become Dementia Friends, and over 400 communities committing to becoming dementia friendly in the UK.

Supported by my department, the Alzheimer's Society co-ordinates the Global Dementia Friends Network, which now has 44 countries developing similar programmes, with nearly 16 million Dementia Friends across all continents.

In Brighton, the Dementia Action Alliance is partnering with Chess in Schools and Communities to give free chess lessons to older people, helping them keep their minds active while giving them opportunities to socialise.

Participating in music can help bring people together and stimulate memories – through Singing for the Brain for example.

Or simple ideas like the Southbank Centre using working poets to run a poetry course for people with dementia and their families.

Common-sense interventions like these are simple yet effective. And I want to see more of them.

Change is happening. Today's event is a way of sharing all this great practice. It's a way of restating our determination to make even more progress towards that goal of transformed care and support, of vastly improved social awareness and the first treatments by 2025.

I will work with any nation, any partner who has innovative solutions to defeat dementia. We must not become complacent, we must all keep an open mind to embrace the new opportunities offered by technology and science.

But let's not lose sight of the simple message from Sir Terry Pratchett:

“It's possible to live well with dementia.”