

11 Reasons We Can't Ignore Alzheimer's Anymore

Michael Hodin: March 17, 2014

With the near-perfect correlation between Alzheimer's and aging, the longevity miracle of the 20th century is in danger of becoming a health crisis in this century.

As they look at the Obama administration's budget projections for 2015, analysts at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) might factor in 11 vital points about Alzheimer's as part of a serious new analysis of what is to come:

- 1.** Alzheimer's is a fiscal nightmare. It already consumes 1 percent of global GDP per year, or roughly \$604 billion. The costs are extraordinary in large part because of the intensive caregiving required for patients with this dementia – and by mid-century, the total number of people requiring care will triple. Private sector innovation in caregiving may help stem the tide.
- 2.** Rates of the illness will quadruple. In the next 35 years, cases of Alzheimer's are going to quadruple, reaching 135 million by mid-century. Right now, if you're over age 65, you stand a one-in-eight chance of getting the disease. After age 85, your odds jump to nearly one in two. The prevalence of Alzheimer's in today's developing and poor countries will skyrocket even more than in the developed world.
- 3.** Alzheimer's is the third deadliest disease in the U.S. Each year, Alzheimer's takes nearly half a million American lives.
- 4.** Alzheimer's is endlessly destructive. Most people think Alzheimer's destroys people's ability to remember. It's far worse than that, unfortunately. The dementia struggles of Dean Smith, the legendary basketball coach at the University of North Carolina (UNC), illustrate the point; an ESPN article discusses the icon's deterioration after 36 years of college coaching (he retired in 1997). Incredibly, he no longer enjoys watching basketball; the games are too confusing and the action moves too fast.
- 5.** There may be many kinds of Alzheimer's. When John Wayne had cancer, it was called "the cancer"; there are now dozens of kinds of cancer. Some very smart people think that's the situation today with Alzheimer's. We think it's one degenerative disease, but there may be countless forms – which will require different treatments, preventions, and care methods.
- 6.** The illness demands new awareness. The UK has started a program that trains citizens in retail, banking, and other customer-focused jobs to be "dementia friends." There are still many unpleasant stigmas surrounding those who have Alzheimer's, but the right awareness programs can help.
- 7.** High-tech solutions are in the pipeline. Technologies may rewrite the possibilities of life with dementia. Residential homes are becoming dementia friendly with the help of digital technologies such as floor sensors and "smart" reminders. These technologies will drastically extend a person's ability to live

independently or even with semi-independence. George Vradenburg, a top advocate, has begun to talk about Google Glasses as a prosthetic for those with Alzheimer's.

8. "Big data" may lead to solutions. We hear the rallying cry for big data on everything from unsynchronized stoplights to the war on terror. Leading organizations are using "big data" to help unlock Alzheimer's mysteries. The prospects are promising: We may learn to analyze data sets such as the Framingham Heart Study or several of the Dutch, UK or German data sets that are increasingly collected on pricing and insurance schemes.

9. New care models are instructive. As private sector models of home care, such as Home Instead Senior Care, extend their Alzheimer's care training, we're learning more about the disease than we often did through traditional analytical approaches. The applications are not only for more effective and better care but for the ability to marry technology with private, targeted and personal home care.

10. We need prevention before cure. New studies are teaching us more about the prevention of Alzheimer's even before we learn how to cure or adequately treat the dreaded disease.

11. There's a new advocacy push. The irreverent Hollywood comedian Seth Rogen delivered a passionate plea for greater action against Alzheimer's disease before a U.S. Senate committee last month, noting his wife's mother has suffered cruelly from the illness. In London, Alzheimer's Disease International has begun a global petition to put Alzheimer's on the G20 agenda. After seeing significant recognition by the G8 under David Cameron's leadership, Alzheimer's advocates are rightly setting their sights on the G20 meeting in Australia. Still, even as the star of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up* expresses the same goals as experts in the field, it remains curious how little most of us still know about such a difficult, tragic and costly disease.
