

Feldman and Estabrooks: Why Canada needs a national dementia strategy

 CALGARY HERALD
[More from Calgary Herald](#)

Published on: December 17, 2015 | Last Updated: December 17, 2015 1:15 PM MST



By Howard Feldman and Carole Estabrooks

One of the biggest threats to quality of life and health in aging is the loss of cognitive abilities and functional autonomy associated with dementia, including Alzheimer's disease. The projections of the number of Canadians living with dementia are staggering, with over 750,000 individuals affected today, a doubling by 2030 — and with health-care costs of \$293 billion by 2040.

In September 2015, the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (CAHS) held a forum on dementia in Canada. This brought together social scientists, biomedical and health-services researchers, health-care practitioners and technology experts to review knowledge about prevention and care of dementia with the goal of advancing solutions.

The forum's overarching message was that while we have seen many successful pilot projects across the country, there is no mechanism to ensure that these best practices and evidence are scaled up so that all communities in Canada benefit.

Canada needs a national action plan to address dementia and Alzheimer's. And we need one soon. Here's why.

Drugs are not presently the answer, and imminent pharmaceutical solutions seem unlikely with more than 200 drug development failures in the last 30 years.

Prevention is promising, but challenging. The recently reported FINGER study shows that dietary counselling, exercise training, blood pressure control and cognitive training achieved significant benefits in cognition and well-being. Unfortunately, there is no clear way to scale up these important findings for the population.

Then, there are quality of life, mobilization and sustaining a safe environment which are also critical for people living with dementia in their homes and community settings. Promising solutions range from age-friendly community design to technology.

Dementia-friendly communities and optimizing built environments are being explored internationally. They enhance accessibility, way-finding and engagement in community life. Those affected with dementia may also stay in their homes longer, through smart technologies that prompt tasks and collect data that can be relayed to family and health-care providers. Robotics, too, may support an individual's cognitive strength while futuristic self-driving cars come ever closer to implementation.

There's no magic bullet. We need a multi-faceted approach that requires leadership and adequate resourcing for implementation.

Accessibility to assessment, diagnosis, treatment and comprehensive continuity of care are a major challenge everywhere. Quebec offers a promising model with the family doctor at the centre of an interdisciplinary team, co-ordinating care and supporting affected individuals and their families.

Home care needs national attention, too. The type of home support available varies widely, with limited provision being the common feature. The truth is family and friends

of persons with dementia provide most of the care and the health-care system tends to be reactive rather than guiding or integrating care.

We can address this with a national focus. Noteworthy programs have been developed within provincial boundaries, but have not yet spread.

In Saskatchewan, researchers and clinicians have created a one-stop shop dementia intervention clinic using telehealth, allowing more care to be provided in the home community, making it easier for those living in rural areas.

A national plan also needs to address the later stages of living with dementia. Right now, we are highly dependent on residential care settings where there are significant challenges across the country in providing consistent quality of care, quality of life and quality end-of-life care.

We can no longer hope for simple solutions or a miracle drug to cure our dementia problem. And the status quo simply won't hold. We need a strategic action plan that facilitates prevention strategies, advances systems of care delivery, re-shapes our living and built environments and mobilizes technology so that all Canadians with dementia are supported in their communities as long as possible, and when that is no longer possible, receive exemplary quality care.

We've known about the rising rates of dementia and the catastrophic costs to the health-care system for years. We need a multi-faceted action plan with government, the private sector and the community at large coming together.

Howard Feldman is an adviser with EvidenceNetwork.ca and professor of neurology at the University of British Columbia. Carole Estabrooks is a professor and Canada research chair at the University of Alberta's faculty of nursing.