Media Release

The dementia revolution

- Leading international authority on dementia and ethics calls for revolution in attitudes to dementia by governments and society
- Dementia research funding disproportionately low

In his speech today at the National Press Club of Australia Professor Julian Hughes, who has been in Australia on a lecture tour on behalf of Alzheimer’s Australia, said attitudes need to change towards dementia in order to tackle the enormous challenges it is bringing.

“It is hard to escape the conclusion that we need a revolution in attitudes to dementia on the part of governments and society – to translate fear of dementia into action that results in more positive attitudes to dementia,” said Professor Hughes, who is visiting from the UK.

“A person with dementia remains the same person despite changes in mood, cognition and behaviour. A person with dementia is of equal value to a person without dementia.”

Both statements ring true when talking about the complex ethical issues in the delivery of dementia care services and the everyday decisions carers have to make.

“We have to recognise that, when caring for someone with dementia, minimising risk often means foregoing benefits and restricting freedom, which in turn may be highly detrimental both to the person’s sense of autonomy, and to their overall well-being.”

“They (people with dementia) are less likely to receive palliative medication and pain relief, less likely to have attention paid to their spiritual and religious needs, and less likely to be referred to palliative care specialist than people who don’t have dementia,” said Professor Hughes on end of life care.

“We need better understandings of what palliative care means in the context of dementia and how to respond to the central moral difficulties in dementia that result from the certainty that, at some point, the person will lose capacity to make decisions.”

Glenn Rees, Alzheimer’s Australia National CEO, echoes these conclusions.
“We share the same experiences with the UK of negative society attitudes towards dementia, the failures in the health system to address the continuing need for carers and dementia friendly services and the funding needed to beat dementia.”

“A revolution in the way we approach health policy and aged care is needed that includes the notion of ‘person-centred’ care.”

Mr Rees also shares Professor Hughes’ concerns over health policy that has yet to embrace dementia as a chronic disease.

“Both in the UK and Australia the level of investment in dementia research is simply inadequate to the task if we are to identify those at risk of dementia and find medications that delay onset,” Professor Hughes said in his address.

“Something that is as harmful as dementia requires good quality research, which, in turn, will support and encourage good quality care.”

He said combined research funding on dementia in Australia was just $22 million for 2007–09, compared with $160 million for cancer research. As well, spending on research for cardiovascular disease was $110 million for the same period, and for diabetes that figure was $60 million.

Professor Hughes is a consultant in Old Age Psychiatry and Honorary Professor of Philosophy of Ageing with Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and the Institute for Ageing and Health at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom.

He is visiting each State and Territory in Australia on his lecture tour, Ethical Issues and Decision-Making in Dementia Care, for Alzheimer’s Australia.

Professor Hughes will be speaking at The National Press Club of Australia on Tuesday 22 June 2010 at 12:30pm.

Professor Hughes’ National Press Club speech is attached under embargo until 22 June 2010, 12:30pm. To arrange an interview with Professor Hughes please contact Tegan McGrath.

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**Notes to editors:**
Dementia is the term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in a person’s cognitive ability. It is a broad term used to describe a loss of memory, intellect, rationality, social skills and physical functioning. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common form of dementia.

Dementia is not a normal part of ageing, however it is more common after the age of 65.

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Report on the Operations of the NHMRC Strategic Plan 2007-09