



1 November 2010

The Hon Mark Butler, MP
Minister for Mental Health and Ageing
c/o National Evaluation of the Dementia Initiative
Dementia Policy and Programs Section
Department of Health and Ageing
MDP 650
GPO Box 9848
Canberra, ACT 2601

Dear Minister Butler,

Re: Submission into the Findings from the Dementia Initiative National Evaluation

On behalf of the Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG), I would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Final Report of the Dementia Initiative National Evaluation produced by the LAMA Consortium. The Report provides a comprehensive overview and evaluation of the Dementia National Health Priority Initiative and highlights many of the important outcomes that have contributed to support people with dementia and their carers.

Of particular interest to the AAG was the evaluation of Measure 1: Dementia – A National Health Priority, which focused on targeted dementia research, care initiatives and early intervention programs, with the aim of improving the quality of life for people with dementia and their carers. This was achieved through activities that:

- increased the level of knowledge, understanding and evidence in relation to assessment and care, risk reduction and prevention, treatment, management and support to improve the quality of life of people with dementia and their carers;
- improved partnerships and networks between researchers, health and aged care service providers, consumers and other stakeholders;
- consolidated dementia research, encouraged national and international collaboration, and funded further research;
- expanded early intervention services and developed awareness strategies to encourage prevention and early intervention; and
- assisted people with dementia to remain in their own homes longer, with appropriate evidence based assessment, treatment, support and care

Of the various projects designed to support Measure 1, the AAG was most interested in those around research and innovation; namely, the National Dementia Research Workshop, the Dementia Research Grants, the Dementia Collaborative Research Centres, and the Dementia Research Mapping exercise. Each of these projects will be discussed in more detail below.

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The National Dementia Research Workshop

The evaluation of the Dementia Initiative concluded that while the workshop was an appropriate early project in the Initiative, it was unable to adequately identify and prioritise gaps in dementia research, primarily because the Workshop only perfunctorily engaged consumers; that is, people with dementia and their carers were unable to engage with the content of the Workshop and effectively contribute to the same degree as professionals and dementia specialists. Moreover, there was minimal representation from special needs groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and rural and remote groups.

To address these gaps, the AAG suggests that stronger ties need to be forged between consumers and consumer advocates, and the research community when developing dementia specific research projects. To this end, the AAG supports the concept of a National Conference for all Dementia Initiative projects that provides a meeting place for all stakeholders to share information and ideas for future development of the Initiative. As suggested by the National Evaluation, a national conference could also include a consumer workshop to ensure consumers have a voice in the development of dementia research and services.

Dementia Research Grants

The Dementia Research Grants Program was found to be a worthwhile investment and contributed to the objectives of the Dementia – A National Health Priority initiative by increasing the level of knowledge, understanding and evidence in relation to dementia, particularly in the areas of assessment, treatment, management, care and service. The AAG insists, however, that more funding is needed into dementia research. For example, the National Evaluation found that epidemiology and public health, and risk and prevention, were under-represented within the Dementia Research Grants Program. Likewise, there were no projects addressing younger onset dementia or specifically identifying socio-economic status as an issue.

Importantly, the dementia research program should also fund a program of ongoing research in translational health services research to explore the development of innovative models of health and community service provision for people with dementia, and strategies to build the capacity of both unregulated workers and health professionals to configure their practice in ways that better support the care needs of people with dementia and carers. The AAG would encourage the Australian Government to invest in greater research to address these current gaps and assist in building a robust evidence-base to assist with the development of sound policy and practice outcomes.

The AAG also advocates for greater resources to assist researchers disseminate their findings to a wide range of audiences. An important component of research is knowledge translation; therefore, assisting researchers to present their findings at multi-disciplinary conferences that include policy makers and health practitioners, and publish widely in journals and industry magazines, is important as a key strategy to facilitate evidence translated into policy and practice.

Dementia Collaborative Research Centres

The AAG agrees with the National Evaluation's conclusions that the Dementia Collaborative Research Centres should continue to be supported and maintained. The DCRCs have been an important initiative in terms of promoting and supporting dementia specific research, and in relation to knowledge translation and dissemination of findings. The AAG does believe, however,

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that a greater proportion of DCRC funding and resources should go towards assisting more doctoral students and emerging researchers focus on dementia specific projects in an effort to build Australia's capacity in dementia research. A strong research and development focus, supporting skill development and career opportunities for dementia researchers will be a national resource in addressing an ageing population over the coming decades.

Dementia Research Mapping

The Final Report states that the Dementia Research Mapping project was an effective exercise in that it produced a comprehensive report identifying research gaps. As there is rapid growth in the area of dementia research, and due to the multidisciplinary nature of dementia research, the AAG recommends that the Dementia Research Mapping project be ongoing, with revised editions of the report produced regularly through the Australian Government's portal Ageing Research Online, and the findings widely disseminated amongst the ageing research community through ageing related conferences and journals such as the Australasian Journal on Ageing.

Conclusion

Overall, the AAG agrees with the findings of the Dementia Initiative National Evaluation in that it has overwhelmingly met its objectives and shown positive returns in relation to the significant investment made by the Australian Government. The next phase should be about moving forward, and progressing the good work undertaken to date. This involves continuing to evaluate and revise gaps in the evidence base, another round of dementia research grants to address current gaps, and continued support for the Dementia Collaborative Research Centres.

The AAG would be only too pleased to engage with your Office and the Department of Health and Ageing to develop and implement a strategy for prioritising the gaps in the evidence base and developing a national agenda, as well as identify strategies for better knowledge translation between researchers and policy makers and health professionals, to improve the quality of life for people with dementia and their carers.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the final report of the Dementia Initiative National Evaluation and I look forward to the outcomes from this report.

Kind regards,

Professor Gill Lewin
President
Australian Association of Gerontology

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