

NEWS

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BREAKTHROUGH: *New imaging technology is helping early diagnosis of dementia*

New hope for dementia sufferers

Research targets early diagnosis and intervention.

A scientific study being conducted by CSIRO is providing new hope for the understanding and treatment of dementia.

With 1,600 new cases identified each week, dementia is becoming an increasing national health priority.

The House of Representatives Health and Ageing Committee is conducting a public inquiry focusing on how early diagnosis and intervention for dementia can play a role in improving the quality of life, social and community engagement and future planning for people with dementia and their families.

“The historical success of reducing the impact of chronic disorders on individuals and society rests on two

fundamental pillars – early diagnosis and intervention,” CSIRO said in its submission to the inquiry.

In its current study, ‘The Australian imaging biomarkers and lifestyle study of ageing’, CSIRO is working with other research bodies and universities to improve understanding of the causes and diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease, the most common form of dementia.

The study involves 1,000 volunteers and brings together world leading researchers with expertise from a number of medical disciplines aimed at finding ways to diagnose dementia in its earliest stages.

“It is clear that intervention is more biologically effective and more cost effective to society and government

when it is applied at the earlier stages of the disease,” CSIRO said.

“CSIRO has identified dementia, and particularly Alzheimer’s disease, as an area of high priority and one in which we have devoted significant activity and resources within the organisation’s research priorities and in national collaborations.”

CSIRO has been attempting to identify the first measurable signs of the onset of the disease and thereby produce a platform to soundly test both lifestyle and therapeutic approaches to slow progression or prevent the initiation of the disease.

For early detection, CSIRO told the committee impressive advances in imaging technology have been made and it expects those technologies to be more refined and more sophisticated in the immediate future.

However CSIRO representative, Professor Lynne Cobiac said there is no point detecting Alzheimer’s early if we do not have an intervention.

“At this stage we do not have really strong evidence for an effective intervention, and that is part of the big challenge for this research – can we find an intervention that works,” Professor Cobiac said.

“CSIRO and its collaborators are looking at the role of lifestyle interventions, and that includes understanding the role of stress, understanding how physical activity may help to delay any further cognitive decline in people with mild cognitive impairment; and also the role of food and nutrition in terms of delaying cognitive impairment.”

The next focus for CSIRO from their research findings is to use the information available on how to detect the disease and intervene to prevent the disease from taking place.

“Prevention is a very laudable goal, and we may not be able to actually prevent it, but if we can delay the onset by as few as, say, five years, then that will have a significant impact both for health and also for the economic status of the health budget.” •

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