

PM+: Pressing need for EU action on Alzheimer's and Parkinson's

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Opinion Plus

EU's policymakers need to recognise the scale and threat of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, argues Colin Mackay



Degenerative brain disorders are the greatest threat to sustaining health and social care in Europe. 21st century Europeans enjoy a life expectancy and a quality of health that previous generations could only dream of.

Advances in medical science and improvements in public health mean that treatments for many diseases once seen as deadly or disabling have become part of routine care.

Premature death from infectious diseases, heart disease and a growing number of cancers is increasingly uncommon.

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However, these benefits have come at a cost. Our increasing longevity has uncovered a wide incidence of degenerative conditions where medical science cannot yet provide solutions.

The most worrying of these are neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

These can be hugely debilitating diseases; individuals who develop these conditions may remain physically robust, but their mental capacity can become severely compromised and their quality of life impaired.

Alternatively, they may retain their faculties but deteriorate physically. As the disease progresses, sufferers increasingly lose the ability to look after themselves, often requiring the support of a full-time carer.

One of the main problems is how little we know about these conditions. Prevention is challenging; the triggers for these diseases are not well understood and there are virtually no early warnings of onset.

By the time symptoms develop, the disease is fully established, with no hope of a cure. At best, available treatments can only slow the progress of symptoms; in many sufferers, they are almost completely ineffectual.

As the population ages, the number of people developing these conditions will continue to grow. The demand this will place on resources threatens to overwhelm our social systems. Therefore we urgently need to take action to deal with the challenge.

As a society, we are duty-bound to offer sufferers of these conditions, and the families and carers that support them, the same optimism as those diagnosed with other diseases.

We need to prioritise the search for new, more effective treatments that will improve outcomes and quality of life for patients.

We also need to improve understanding of the basic science behind these conditions. It is these insights that will help us predict more accurately who may be at risk of developing these conditions and to identify ways to prevent the disease taking hold.

Where should the policy priorities lie? Firstly, policymakers need to recognise that this is a genuine unmet need and ensure that public research into neurodegenerative conditions is adequately funded.

This will be the key to understanding the processes that trigger these diseases and how to prevent their development. Advances in techniques such as genomics and large-scale data analysis may provide much-needed insights, and a lack of resources should not be a barrier.

Secondly, there should be hope for those who already suffer from these conditions and the carers who

look after them. They should not have to wait for a major breakthrough or a miracle cure; too many people are already suffering.

Policymakers should identify ways to stimulate research and development of new therapies. Given the absence of effective therapies, promising treatments should benefit from accelerated approval processes and rapid reimbursement.

Europe's policymakers must recognise the scale of the threat that these conditions pose to Europe's social systems and ultimately to Europe's economy. The solutions are clear; prioritising research into neurodegenerative conditions and rewarding innovation will go a long way to mitigating the impact.

At the same time, they must recognise that this is already a pressing need and that any action needs to be swift and decisive.

About the author

Colin Mackay is Managing Director of the Brussels Writing Bureau, an editorial consultancy, and a regular writer on healthcare and science topics

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