Op-Ed Submission

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Alberta's Alarming Rise in Dementia

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The number of people living with dementia in Alberta is rising rapidly. Do you know that by 2050, more than 200,900 Albertans will be living with dementia, which is more than tripling of the current number of 59,000 people in the province?

In January, we learned about the latest population trends of dementia in Alberta with the Alzheimer Society of Canada's release of The Landmark Study – Report 2: The Many Faces of Dementia in Canada.

The report indicates drastic changes in the number of people living with dementia in Canada over the next three decades, and how factors such as age, sex and ethnic origin can impact people's experience differently.

By 2050, the number of Indigenous Peoples living with dementia in Alberta is expected to rise by 283 per cent, similar to the projected 286 per cent rise projected in the overall population in the province.

Within thirty years, one out of every three Albertans who live with dementia will be of Asian origin – including Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Iranian, Japanese, Korean, Lebanese, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese and more – up more than 1,400 per cent from 2020. This increase is far higher than the Canadian figure.

Females are twice as likely to be affected by dementia as males, accounting for almost two out every three people diagnosed and nearly 60 per cent of all caregivers.

By 2050, the number of people under the age of 65 living in Alberta with young onset dementia is expected to grow to 5,500.

These numbers are staggering. More importantly, they represent faces of people who are impacted differently by dementia, each in their unique ways. Dementia can affect a person's daily life in multiple ways, including the abilities to remember, understand, communicate, and complete tasks. The impact of dementia touches on a person's personal and work functions. But it does not stop there. For a family caregiver, a diagnosis of dementia can mean changing their life plans in order to provide care to a loved one. Currently more than 30,400 unpaid care partners provide just over 40 million hours per year of support in Alberta. This is roughly the equivalent of 23,000 health care attendants. By 2050, that number is expected to balloon to 118,200 care partners and nearly

161.4 million unpaid hours of care annually. The resulting societal implications and economic costs are phenomenal.

Furthermore, the report indicates that the diverse groups of Albertans who are more likely to develop dementia can have different lived experiences, including barriers in accessing services, care and support.

We learn that Indigenous Peoples face health inequities rooted in colonization, which can contribute to a higher risk of developing dementia. Stress from factors such as systemic racism, inadequate housing, poverty and the lasting effects of residential schools and colonialism can all affect brain health. Systemic racism is also a structural barrier to receiving a diagnosis and treatment in a timely manner. It starts with each of us to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities to address these important issues urgently.

The dramatic increase of dementia in people from different ethnic communities is very concerning. This can be compounded by underlying stigma that is unique in each community. We must reaffirm our commitment for additional resources to advance research and provide culturally sensitive care in order to reduce the risk and improve the lived experiences of dementia among these groups.

People under the age of 65 who develop young onset dementia experience unique challenges, including at work and in receiving disability accommodation, and can benefit from support programs that bridge the health, labour and legal sectors. Education and continued professional development among healthcare providers are also important to raise awareness that will help in establishing a diagnosis in the first place.

The Many Faces of Dementia in Canada is a wakeup call for all of us. Policies and programs with appropriate resourcing must be developed to meet the customized needs of diverse communities, and the process must include meaningful engagement with people living with dementia and care partners from diverse backgrounds. The Alzheimer Society of Alberta & NWT is committed to working collaboratively with everyone to create resources and provide support. We all need to do everything in our power to prepare for what’s coming, and we need to make sure it’s the right action to support the people who will be most affected.

It is on all of us to maintain a strong commitment to improving dementia care in Alberta. Learn more about resources available in your community and how to support the Alzheimer Society of Alberta & NWT’s work at Alzheimer.ab.ca.

Dr. George Andrews is the chief executive officer of the Alzheimer Society of Alberta & NWT. Prior to joining the Alzheimer Society of Alberta & NWT, he held leadership positions in various NGOs for over 30 years and has facilitated leadership training for NGO leaders domestically and internationally. He was the driving force for the Hope for Tomorrow fund, which is committed to funding dementia research with Alberta based post secondary institutions. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from University of Alberta, a Master of Leadership from Royal Roads University and a Doctor of Business Administration from the University of Bath.

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General Hospital and a researcher at the Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute. Dr. Wong received his M.D. degree with Honours in Research from the University of Alberta and has been appointed to the Order of Canada for his contributions to the field of geriatric medicine, including the advancement of policies, education and specialized, culturally sensitive health care.

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