

## Dementia

# Storms ahead for dementia research

UNITED KINGDOM

## The pandemic is eating away at valuable dementia research progress

One unsuspecting night in June 1993, a Scarborough hotel tumbled down into the sea below. The contents of Holbeck Hall spilled out across the rocky cliff-side, together with all the memories the hotel had housed.

“I knew everything in it,” said the hotel’s owner, Joan Turner, “I’ve lost my dream.” Turner’s loss was palpable but the insidious process of coastal erosion that swept Holbeck Hall away took decades to reach this destructive point.

### Erosion of the mind

Like those coastal cliffs susceptible to the elements, dementia is a category of neurodegenerative brain disorders that causes decades of untraceable damage, eventually revealing itself as devastating memory loss. Described by the British Psychological Society as “the gradual erosion of mental and later physical function,” dementia causing illnesses like Alzheimer’s disease gradually erodes away a person’s inner self until only fragments remain.

This erosion of the mind affects over 5m people globally. With no known treatments, this number is projected to soar to 131.5m by 2050. Clinical research is therefore vital to altering the course of this disheartening projection. Professor James Rowe, a dementia researcher at Cambridge University, attests that to obtain life-changing treatments there needs to be “a massive and sustained effort” from investors and researchers. However, in recent months, it has become unclear if dementia research can weather the stormy skies brought on by COVID-19.

### Storms brewing

The detrimental effects of the pandemic have rippled across the globe, a fact mirrored in the field of dementia re-

search. The communicable spread of COVID-19 has emptied the labs, meaning that 95% of scientists studying dementia have had projects delayed. What is already a troubling statistic is made worse by the catastrophic blow dealt to future research investment.

In the UK, figures for dementia spends are astronomically low — according to Alzheimer’s Research UK (ARUK), only 2% of medical research spending went towards dementia in 2016. Without the government to rely on, charity funding is integral to dementia studies. But as COVID-19 cases rose, funding avenues through charity work were abruptly halted. Today, a reported 29% of researchers are subject to budget cuts, another 72% expect limited future funding opportunities. This news has created an uncertain future in which over a third of scientists have considered leaving research entirely.

Speaking out on this unequivocal loss, the CEO of ARUK, Ian Wilson, declares that COVID-19 is jeopardising

progress and could “significantly delay promising breakthroughs.” The already time-conscious search for dementia treatments has indeed suffered immensely; experts anticipate that it will take 4.5 years before medical research can return to normal levels.

### Turning back the tide

This news cannot be taken lightly by the families subject to dementia’s relentless nature. Since COVID-19, their financial and emotional strain has increased tenfold as more families report rapid cognitive decline in their loved ones. For Dan Goerke, his wife’s Alzheimer’s disease is like “a ship stuck in the fog,” her smiles of recognition acting like a “lighthouse.” But since the pandemic separated the couple, these smiles have all but stopped.

Whilst the pandemic has catalysed an immense time loss in dementia research, some are using this as an opportunity to act. Operating as another lighthouse in the dark, UK politicians and scientists demand that the Conservative government deliver on their 2019 Manifesto promise of doubling research funding to over £160m. Though a response has not yet been heard, a well-needed economic boost in dementia research is the only way to restore the damage caused by COVID-19 and, perhaps much more vitally, stave off this disease’s erosive powers. ■

