

# Management of Dementia: Between Gloom and Optimism

Dementia is a chronic, debilitating condition that is dreaded by elderly individuals. The disease also causes a heavy burden on the afflicted individual's family. Dementia is also a major public health problem in most countries, as it constitutes a societal burden. In fact, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has recommended prioritizing dementia research and management because of its impact on public health.

As the worldwide population is rapidly aging, the number of people with dementia is expected to increase. It is estimated that the prevalence of dementia will double every 20 years<sup>1)</sup>.

The progressive course of dementia, as well as the anticipation of a rapid rise in its incidence rate, initially produced a gloomy outlook regarding this disease and its treatment. However, the pessimism surrounding the diagnosis and treatment of dementia that has prevailed over the past decades is slowly being replaced by some more promising study findings and prospects.

First, data regarding the possibility of preventing dementia has been accumulating, mostly in the field of epidemiologic studies. For example, Norton et al.<sup>2)</sup> proposed that the incidence rate of Alzheimer's disease can be decreased through improved access to education as well as introducing effective methods to reduce vascular-related risk factors (such as physical inactivity, smoking, midlife hypertension, midlife obesity, and diabetes) and depression. Second, some recent studies show an actual decrease in the age-specific incidence rates of dementia in high-income countries<sup>3,4)</sup>. They attribute this phenomenon to improved education and cardiovascular health at an early age. Third, many clinical studies aimed at investigating the pathogenetic mechanisms of Alzheimer's disease are being launched. Fourth, currently used drugs appear to show at least symptomatic improvements; this decreases the burden on caregivers and delays nursing home admittance for patients with dementia.

However, there are still reasons to gloom. Current drugs cannot stop or reverse the progression of the disease, and clinical studies on candidate disease-modifying therapies have not been successful to date. Some scholars argue against promoting dementia-prevention methods on the grounds that there is no evidence that the actual pathology of the Alzheimer's disease is preventable<sup>5)</sup>.

The most that the medical community can offer at present is to make the best use of currently known dementia prevention and treatment methods. First, clinicians should spread awareness of such methods to the general public so that individuals can adopt them in their daily lives. Second, early recognition and treatment of dementia should be improved by cultivating clinical management skills. Third, the medical doctors should be more amenable to allowing welfare services to assist patients with dementia and their family members.

Real optimism does not mean ignoring the negative aspects of dementia, but emphasizing the positive outlooks. The decision for clinicians is whether to bring gloom or provide an atmosphere of hope to patients with dementia and their families.

Dong-Woo Lee

*Editorial Board Member*

Department of Psychiatry,  
Inje University Sanggye Paik Hospital, Seoul, Korea  
E-mail: [dwlee@paik.ac.kr](mailto:dwlee@paik.ac.kr)

## REFERENCES

1. Prince M, Wimo A, Guerchet M, Ali GC, Wu YT, Prina M. World Alzheimer report 2015: the global impact of dementia, an analysis of prevalence, incidence, costs and trends. London: Alzheimer's Disease International; 2015.
2. Norton S, Matthews FE, Barnes DE, Yaffe K, Brayne C. Potential for primary prevention of Alzheimer's disease: an analysis of population-based data. *Lancet Neurol* 2014;13:788-94.
3. Larson EB, Yaffe K, Langa KM. New insights into the dementia epidemic. *N Engl J Med* 2013;369:2275-7.
4. Matthews FE, Arthur A, Barnes LE, Bond J, Jagger C, Robinson L, et al. A two-decade comparison of prevalence of dementia in individuals aged 65 years and older from three geographical areas of England: results of the Cognitive Function and Ageing Study I and II. *Lancet* 2013;382:1405-12.
5. Lon White. Prevention of dementia. In: Proceedings of International Conference of Healthy and Active Ageing; 2016 May 17; Seoul, Korea.