

## SPEAKING WITH YOUR MLA

There is a human element to Alzheimer's disease, and these drugs make a difference. Telling **your story** has a great impact. You may not be granted much time to speak with your MLA, but even a short meeting can be effective so make every effort to set one up.

MLAs ought to be interested in what you have to say. There are two key things that government can do to improve the lives of people affected by Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. Ask your MLA to push for our two key issues:

- The government of B.C. must add the three Health Canada-approved medications for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease to PharmaCare to ensure equal access to these drugs by all British Columbians.
- The government of B.C. must make a commitment to enhance home and community care programs for the benefit of people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, their families and caregivers, through a province-wide framework of dementia care and education.

So far, Ministers of Health Services have not been convinced that Alzheimer medications are effective, or that the province should pay the cost for those who could not afford them. Also, care services vary across the province and not everyone is able to access support when and where they need it.

In the past, the B.C. government decided not to include Alzheimer drugs on the provincial drug plan on the grounds that there is insufficient proof that the drugs are effective or safe. This is contrast to every other province in Canada, other than Newfoundland.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

**Numbers:** More than 61,000 British Columbians are estimated to have dementia. Of these, it is estimated that 41,000 have Alzheimer's disease. In B.C. nearly 14,000 people will develop Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia every year.

**Treatment:** There is no cure for Alzheimer's or dementia, but there is hope in the form of medications that may improve memory, language and other cognitive abilities:

- **Aricept**, manufactured by Pfizer.
- **Exelon**, manufactured by Novartis.
- **Reminyl**, manufactured by Janssen Ortho

**Health Canada approval:** The Health Protection Branch of the Federal Government has approved Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl as safe and effective medications for the symptomatic treatment of Alzheimer's disease. The drugs are approved for people in the mild to moderate stages of Alzheimer's disease. Research indicates these drugs may delay the progression of symptoms of the disease.

**National accessibility:** Aricept, Exelon and Reminyl have been included in government drug plans in all provinces except British Columbia.

**Geriatrician recommended:** The Canadian Consensus Conference on Dementia, a Canadian-wide group of geriatric specialists, recommends the use of these medications. In B.C., specialists in geriatrics acknowledge the value of these Alzheimer medications, as described in the 2004 Treatment, Efficacy in Alzheimer Disease (TREAD) report.

**Benefits of medications:**

- Use of Aricept, Exelon or Reminyl can **improve behaviours** like aggression, agitation and pacing, which are often associated with Alzheimer's disease. In fact, about 70% of people receiving these medications experience either improvement or a stabilization of these symptoms.
- Research clearly demonstrates that use of these drugs can improve cognitive skills (thinking) and enhance memory for people with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease. By **increasing the quality of life**, people with dementia are able to maintain their skills longer and delay institutionalization.
- Research indicates that **caregivers** of people who take medication have less stress, their burden is reduced and they can care for their family member at home for longer.

**Cost to families:** Medication is available for approximately \$5 per day — about **\$1,825** each year. Because people in B.C. must cover the cost themselves, drugs are only available to those who can afford them. Families often make sacrifices to pay for medication.

**Cost to society:** People with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease — who would most benefit from having these drugs added to PharmaCare — cost society between **\$9,451 to \$25,724** each year. This estimate is based on use of nursing home care, medications, community support services used by caregivers, and unpaid caregiver time.

**Savings for health care:** Despite the huge impact of dementia on the health-care system, our government is concerned about cost even though there is good evidence that proves these medications are cost-effective. The health-care system saves money when people remain in their homes longer and with higher functioning.

If you want more information to build your speaking notes, please contact Barbara Lindsay, Manager of Advocacy and Public Policy, at 604-681-6530, toll-free at 1-800-667-3742 or by e-mail at [blindsay@alzheimerbc.org](mailto:blindsay@alzheimerbc.org).