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Alzheimer's population hits new peak in Colorado: 76,000

Shortage of primary care physicians to care for the growing Alzheimer's dementia population

DENVER, March 10, 2020 – The number of Coloradans living with Alzheimer's disease has reached an all-time high of 76,000, a 4.1% increase over last year, according to the Alzheimer's Association 2020 *Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures* report.

An additional 256,000 Coloradans voluntarily provided 292 million hours of unpaid care for their loved ones valued at \$3.83 billion last year, based on an estimated economic value of \$13.11 per hour.

The report projects that the number of Coloradans living with Alzheimer's will reach 92,000 by 2025 – a 21.1% increase. Nationwide, 5.8 million people in the U.S. over the age of 65 are living with the disease. Because of inconsistencies in diagnosis, the total does not include those under age 65 with younger-onset Alzheimer's. That number is believed to exceed several hundred thousand individuals.

A shortage of trained physicians

The 2020 Alzheimer's Association report also addresses the dramatic shortage of specialty physicians to care for the large and growing number of people in the U.S. with Alzheimer's. The report found that the vast majority of older people diagnosed with dementia never see a dementia care specialist and typically are diagnosed and cared for by non-specialists. The report found:

- 85% of people first diagnosed with dementia were diagnosed by a non-dementia specialist physician, usually a primary care physician.
- One year after diagnosis, less than a quarter of patients had seen a dementia specialist.
- After five years, the percentage of patients who had seen a dementia specialist had only increased to 36%. The total was particularly low for Hispanic and Asian patients.

In Colorado, the number of geriatricians in 2019 (89) would need to increase 225% to 289 by 2050 in order to have enough specialists to serve just 10% of Coloradans 65 and over who are projected to have Alzheimer's disease. Unfortunately, the existing national shortfall of geriatricians is expected to worsen. Between the 2001-02 academic year and 2017-18, the number of geriatrics-related graduate medical education programs grew a modest 1.1%.

Focus on research

"The continued increase in the prevalence of Alzheimer's disease, combined with the shortage of qualified medical professionals, points to the importance of aggressively pursuing research to find a cure for this disease," said Amelia Schafer, executive director of the Colorado Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. "Locally, we have raised and invested \$2 million in a dozen research projects over the past two years, and the national Alzheimer's Association currently has \$167 million invested in more than 500 research projects in 27 countries. We are the leading non-profit funder of Alzheimer's research in the world."

The Alzheimer's Association also has been a driving force behind an increase in federal funding for Alzheimer's research: an increase from \$631 million in 2015 to \$2.8 billion this fiscal year. Those funds are allocated through the National Institutes of Health.

Unprepared physicians

In a separate survey ("*On the Front Lines: Primary Care Physicians and Alzheimer's Care in America*") of more than 1,400 primary care physicians, the Association discovered:

- Half (50%) say the medical profession is not prepared to meet the growing demand of people living with Alzheimer's disease.
- 82% of PCPs say they are on the front lines of providing dementia care, but not all are confident in their care for patients with Alzheimer's and other dementias.
 - Nearly 2 in 5 (39%) report they are "never" or only "sometimes comfortable" making a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or other dementias.
 - Nearly one-third (27%) report they are "never" or only "sometimes comfortable" answering patient questions about Alzheimer's or other dementias.
 - 22% of all PCPs had no residency training in dementia diagnosis and care. Of the 78% who did undergo training, 65% reported that the amount was "very little."

PCPs participating in the survey report that 4 in 10 of their current patients are age 65 and older and, on average, 13% of those patients have been diagnosed with dementia. The majority of PCPs (53%) say they are answering questions related to Alzheimer's or other dementias every few days or more. More than 9 in 10 PCPs (92%) believe patients and caregivers expect them to know the latest thinking and best practices around dementia care.

"The perspectives of primary care physicians raise an important alarm regarding the current reality and future of dementia care in this country," said Joanne Pike, Dr. P.H., chief program officer, Alzheimer's Association. "The number of people living with Alzheimer's and other dementias is increasing and primary care physicians, who are the front line of providing care, are telling us the medical profession is not prepared to meet the future demand. The Alzheimer's Association is committed to working with physicians, health systems, policymakers and others to develop strategies and solutions that ensure timely, high-quality dementia care is available for all who need it."

Key Alzheimer's facts

Key facts contained in the 2020 Alzheimer's Association Facts & Figures report include:

- 76,000 Coloradans over age 65 living with Alzheimer's disease – 5.8 million in the U.S.
- 256,000 Coloradans served as unpaid caregivers for loved ones living with Alzheimer's in 2019, contributing 292 million hours of care valued at \$3.83 billion.
 - Nationally, 16.3 million unpaid caregivers provided 18.6 billion hours of care valued at \$244 billion.
- Colorado will need a 225% increase in geriatricians by 2050 in order to serve just 10% of state residents 65 and over expected to be living with Alzheimer's.
 - Nationally, the U.S. will need a 195% increase in geriatricians by 2050.

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Full text of the 2020 *Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures* report, including the accompanying special report, "*On the Front Lines: Primary Care Physicians and Alzheimer's Care in America*," can be viewed alz.org/facts (starting March 11).

About the Survey

Versta Research conducted surveys on behalf of the Alzheimer's Association about medical training and physician attitudes regarding diagnosis and care of patients with Alzheimer's and other dementias. Surveys were conducted during December 2019. Sample size was 1,000 primary care physicians, 200 recent primary care medical residents, and 202 recent medical school graduates. To qualify for the survey, physicians had to have been in practice for at least two years, and spend at least 50% of their time in direct patient care, with at least 10% of their patients being age 65 or older. For complete details regarding survey methodology, see page 66 of the report.

Alzheimer's Association

The Alzheimer's Association Colorado Chapter is the premier source of information and support for the more than 76,000 Coloradans with Alzheimer's disease, their families and caregivers. Through its statewide network of offices, the Alzheimer's Association offers education, counseling, support groups and a 24-hour Helpline at no charge to families. In addition, contributions help fund advancements in research to prevent, treat and eventually conquer this disease. The Alzheimer's Association advocates for those living with Alzheimer's and their families on related legislative issues, and with health and long-term care providers. For information call the Alzheimer's Association free 24/7 bilingual Helpline at 800-272-3900, or visit www.alz.org/co.

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