

WHO says world is failing people with dementia

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A woman is seen at a care facility for elderly people with dementia, in a glass house that is made especially to reduce loneliness, caused by restrictions on visitations imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Wassenaar, Netherlands [File: Piroshka van de Wouw/Reuters]

Geneva, September 2 (RHC)-- More than 55 million people worldwide are living with dementia, a neurological disorder that robs them of their memory and costs the world \$1.3 trillion a year, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said.

The progressive condition can be caused by stroke, brain injury or Alzheimer's disease and with populations ageing, the number of sufferers is projected to rise to 78 million by 2030 and 139 million by 2050, the WHO said in a report on Thursday.

Yet only one in four countries has a national policy in place to support dementia patients and their families, it said, urging governments to step up to the public health challenge.

Half of these countries are in Europe, with the remainder split between other regions in the world. "Yet even in Europe, many plans are expiring or have already expired, indicating a need for renewed commitment from governments," the WHO said.

The organisation's chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said "dementia robs millions of people of their memories, independence and dignity, but it also robs the rest of us of the people we know and love."

"The world is failing people with dementia, and that hurts all of us," he was quoted as saying in a statement.

Health ministers agreed on a global action plan in 2015, including early diagnosis and providing care, but are falling short on meeting targets by 2025, it said.

Dementia mostly affects those aged 65 and over, but can also touch people in their 30s and 40s. There is no treatment, but studies have shown that some 40 percent of cases could be avoided or delayed by a healthy lifestyle.

Risk factors include depression, low education, social isolation and lack of cognitive stimulation.

Katrin Seeher, from the WHO's mental health and substance use department, told a news briefing that more than 60 percent of people living with dementia were in low and middle-income countries.

"We especially need to reduce the gap that exists between high-income and low and middle-income countries, and between urban and rural areas," she said.

Seeher told Al Jazeera that alarmingly, low- and middle-income countries are also less well prepared than high-income countries to provide services and care for people with dementia.

"[This] means that again, family members and close friends do need to chip in even more, so the rates for informal care are even higher in low- and middle-income countries than in high-income countries," Seeher said.

Medication, hygiene products and household adjustments for dementia patients are more accessible in wealthy countries, which have a greater level of reimbursement than in lower-income countries, the report said.

Dementia affects memory, orientation, learning capacity, language, judgement, and the ability to perform everyday tasks.

Seeher noted that dementia can also affect people aged below 65, with so-called "young-onset dementia" accounting for approximately 10 percent of all dementia cases.

But developing dementia is not inevitable and some risk factors can be reduced, by controlling hypertension, diabetes, diet, depression, and the use of alcohol and tobacco, the WHO said.

“It’s important to remember what’s good for your heart is good for your brain,” Seeher told Al Jazeera.

“Here, we’re targeting risk factors that are shared with other noncommunicable diseases such as being physically active, maintaining a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy body weight, not smoking, not drinking alcohol or reducing it to a minimum,” she said.

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