

The Time to Act against Alzheimer's is Now

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The shocking announcement that [Patricia Summitt is stepping down as head coach](#) of University of Tennessee's signature women's basketball program stunned not just sports fans but the world at large. This isn't another case of a college coach forced to leave because of bad behavior. This is akin to Lou Gehrig's heartbreaking departure from the New York Yankees. Both were talented and admirable people with record-breaking accomplishments whose potential for so much more was cut short by a horrific disease. Gehrig, as everyone knows, was a victim of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease). Summitt found out less than a year ago that she has early onset Alzheimer's disease. She is 59.

Alzheimer's disease frightens most of us, but I don't know whether people realize just how scary this disease actually is. This progressive mind-wasting disease is the [sixth-leading cause of death in the U.S.](#), and is the only cause of death among the top 10 that CANNOT be prevented or cured. About [5.4 million people in the U.S. already suffer from it.](#)

But the future looms dark. Consider the facts that over half of all people age 85+ have some form of dementia. As the 80 million Baby Boomers start to hit that crucial age -- 10,000 turn 65 every day -- we are staring down the barrel of a very big gun.

Plenty more will be affected by it, whether someone they know has the disease or not. That's because as Alzheimer's takes more victims, its cost could cripple our health care system. The [U.S. will spend an estimated \\$200 billion in 2012](#) on caregiving for people with Alzheimer's, including \$140 billion for Medicare and Medicaid. Projections suggest that costs could reach crisis proportions of [over \\$1 trillion by 2050.](#)

The good news: Alzheimer's isn't inevitable. Even if you have a genetic predisposition for it, many experts believe that you can at least delay the symptoms of dementia. We all need to do the things that keep our brains fit: exercise at least 30 minutes a day, five times a week; maintain a diet that's low in saturated fats and has a low glycemic index; challenge the brain with new activities to spur the growth of new brain cells by learning new skills.

But that's not nearly enough. We need to take action not just in our own lives but for the lives of others and for the good of our overall society.

Recently, my husband Ken and I had the opportunity to tour the new Neurosciences Research Building at University of California/San Francisco's Mission Bay campus. Due to open next

month (May 2012), the building will house three important programs dedicated to neurodegenerative diseases: UCSF's own Department of Neurology; the Institute for Neuro-Degenerative Diseases and the W.M. Keck Foundation Center for Integrative Neuroscience. The vision is simple: Through collaboration among outstanding researchers, physician-scientists and patients, UCSF hopes to create a new paradigm for uncovering and implementing novel treatments and cures for these illnesses.

Money is an issue, of course. A recent \$50 million increase boosted government funding for Alzheimer's disease research to just shy of \$500 million for 2012. But that's not enough to make a meaningful difference, says William Thies, chief medical and scientific officer for the Alzheimer's Association. Quoted in a recent article in *USA Today*, Thies states that finding a cure or way to slow down the progression of the disease would require \$2 billion in annual funds. Furthermore, he notes, "Without the spending in that range, we're not going to see the progress we need to see. You can't make progress with the sort of investments made to date."

George Vradenburg, founder of [USAgainstAlzheimer's](#), points out that Alzheimer's has claimed more victims worldwide than HIV, yet the government spends far more money -- \$3 billion a year - on HIV/AIDS research.

We can take a page from the HIV/AIDS handbook -- and, similarly, follow the lessons of those who lobbied for more resources to be devoted to breast cancer, prostate cancer, heart disease and other killers. We need to take action - all of us.

What can you do?

- Join groups such as [USAgainstAlzheimer's](#) and the Alzheimer's Association to keep on top of the latest drug developments and other potential treatments.
- The government is drafting the [National Alzheimer's Project Act](#) to build on and leverage existing federal programs to change the trajectory of the disease. [Sign a petition](#) to ensure the project gets the funding that it needs to make a difference.
- Lobby your Congressional representatives. Better yet, ask your friends to call and e-mail them, too. It's been shown that if a Congressperson gets 25 calls per day on one subject, they sit up and pay attention. That's not a lot of calls. If you ask five friends to ask five of their friends, then you've more than made an impact.

If we all put aside the ten minutes it takes to take action, we can collectively implement change. If not us, who? If not now, when? Otherwise, pretty soon, it might be too late.

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