

The Scourge of Our Times Should Frighten You...Especially If You Are a Woman

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I've been studying aging trends for the past 25 years. The topic, for the most part, has been exhilarating; as Baby Boomers help reinvent traditional notions of retirement, I have to confess that I'm actually excited to see how my own life, and the lives of my colleagues and friends, evolve – something I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have expected 25 years ago.

But there's one dark cloud looming that could snuff out all prospects for a sunny future: Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's has been in the news more and more. Earlier this year, Glen Campbell went public right before he embarked on his farewell tour to promote his newest CD release, letting the world know he suffers from Alzheimers. We saw Patricia Summitt step down as head coach of University of Tennessee's signature women's basketball program after a career of record-breaking accomplishments. Her reason: she has been diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease at age 59.

Rightfully so, Alzheimer's frightens more and more of us in a quickly aging world. Just the idea that you can be alive while slowly and progressively losing your memory, your ability to think and your behavior is hair-raising. Images of the walking dead come to mind. This progressive mind-wasting disease is also 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 5.2 million people in the U.S. over age 65 already suffer from it with 3.4 million of those sufferers women.

And that's just the beginning. As the 78 million baby boomers begin to pass the age of 65—10,000 turn 65 every day—plenty more of us will be affected by it, whether someone we know has the disease or not. That's because as Alzheimer's takes more victims, its cost could cripple our health care systems. 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. Predictions suggest that costs could reach crisis proportions of over \$1 trillion by 2050. We are staring down the barrel of a very big gun.

If there is any good news associated with this horrific disease, it's that the symptoms can possibly be delayed. Even if you have a genetic predisposition to the disease, many experts believe that to be true. We all need to do the things that keep our brains healthy and 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 to spur the growth of new brain cells by learning new skills.

But that's not enough. **WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION**, not just in our own lives but for the lives of others. We need to motivate our leaders to take a proactive stance to actively fight this disease with research dollars.

Not long ago, 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. It opened in May 2012 and houses 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 the big 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 anywhere near 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 book -- 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. And, ask five of your friends, family and colleagues 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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