

## **Dementia after Covid – a call to action from the Dementia UK Ecosystem**

*Leading UK dementia research organisations recently joined funders and pharma representatives in a ‘Dementia UK Ecosystem’ meeting to reflect on lessons learnt from the pandemic in tackling health challenges. The global dementia crisis has only been exacerbated by Covid, and represents a looming emergency requiring increased coordination and urgent investment.*

Covid has clearly had a disproportionate effect on those living with dementia<sup>1</sup> – almost a third of people who died with COVID-19 had dementia from March 2020 to March 2021 in England & Wales, making dementia the most common pre-existing condition in those who died<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the largest increase in excess deaths in the UK was in people with dementia (Jan 2021: 65,000 over 65’s, 31% of whom had dementia, a staggering 8-fold increase from normal times)<sup>3</sup>.

Covid also has serious implications for those not yet diagnosed with dementia. The closure of many memory clinics, combined with fear of infection and social distancing measures, led to a sharp decrease of referrals to memory assessment services, with a parallel drop in the national dementia diagnosis rate. This has created a huge number of people who have missed out on essential support. It is estimated that around 40,000 people are now waiting for a diagnosis across the UK alone. While mass vaccinations may help us enter a ‘new normal’ phase of our lives as we emerge from this crisis, the scale of the dementia challenge will hit back. It became already again the leading cause of death in England.

We need to stand ready for this – new ways of working must be implemented, including more flexible procedures for direct referrals and better telemedicine, striving to maintain high quality care in a world where COVID-19 is endemic<sup>4,5</sup>. A coordinated response across the clinical and research sectors is required.

The *Dementia UK Ecosystem* brings together leaders of dementia research initiatives from the UK Dementia Research Institute, Dementias Platform UK, National Institute for Health Research, Pharma partners, and medical research charities to create a fully joined-up community, promoting communication and coordination of efforts to accelerate progress in tackling dementia.

The coordination and strength of will must be matched by Government support. Now, more than ever, is the time to invest in dementia research. Covid-19 has shown the world how science can tackle major health challenges – we can and should learn from this. Members of *Dementia UK Ecosystem* will join forces to coordinate research efforts, bridging pre-clinical with clinical studies. We will work closely with academic, industry and regulatory agencies, to streamline clinical trial procedures and novel systems to enable effective recruitment. This requires a long-term funding commitment and increased investment in a field that remains drastically underfunded<sup>6,7</sup>.

This Government started its term by declaring that dementia was a priority, and that it would double research funding in a moonshot effort to find treatments<sup>8</sup>. With people with dementia so badly affected by the pandemic, and the research sector reeling from a year of severe disruption, now is the time to make good on that promise.

With time, the Covid pandemic will pass. Dementia will remain. It is not a problem we can wait to solve.

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## Competing interests

Bart De Strooper is consultant for Eisai, Remynd NV, Abbvie and Muna-K5. He is scientific founder of Augustine TX and Munro-K5. He has a small amount of shares from Muna-K5.

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