Aging Concerns

Can loads more research dollars stop Alzheimer's disease by 2025?

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The search for clues to halt the development of amyloid plaques involved in Alzheimer's disease (AD) has led scientists to examine everything from transparent worms that have been described as "cute," "rad," "powerful," "fantastic" and "far-out" to viruses that may trigger this dementia. An irreversible, progressive brain disorder, AD slowly destroys cognition and extinguishes the light in the eyes of the estimated 5.7 million Americans living with the condition—that's not to mention its impact on families.

Although many illnesses desperately need research and drug development dollars, a certain urgency drives Alzheimer's funding in particular. This is because it costs more to care for those suffering from AD, sometimes called "the most expensive disease in America," than to care for those with heart disease and cancer, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

After a string of failed attempts to develop effective drugs to treat AD, funding dried up. But recently, funding—partially fueled by the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) commitment to finding a cure for the illness by 2025—has surged.

Perhaps the windfall is connected to the reality that baby boomers are aging into a medical system that's already strained and stressed. (According to the 2018 Alzheimer's Facts and Figures Report, Medicare and Medicaid paid for $186 billion of the estimated $277 billion associated with AD costs to Americans.)

On top of all of this, factor in the expenditures shouldered by those caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's and the huge toll caregiving takes on the health and productivity of people who are still toiling in the workforce.

In addition, AD has become more visible as families affected by the illness speak out and advocates roll out smarter campaigns to boost awareness.

"Alzheimer's disease is a worthy and complex foe," said Francis Collins, MD, PhD, the director of the NIH, at a summit held earlier this year. "Yet science's armament is growing daily, and we know so much more."

AD is influenced by a host of factors, including genetic variations and unique risks for onset related

to age, family history and cardiovascular conditions. What's more, scientists have been thinking out of the box and chasing novel ideas, such as the effect of gut bacteria and plaque-busting antibodies on brain health.

Meanwhile, researchers conduct large-scale studies of the human genome to hunt for biological drivers of Alzheimer's disease, new parts of the brain to investigate and how differences in individuals may cause Alzheimer's and help or hurt their treatments.

While many welcome the financial support, some experts worry. They're convinced that if scientists don't meet their stated goal, AD research will be considered a very expensive and dismal failure.

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