

Early Alzheimer's Screenings Could Cut Health Care Costs

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(PhysOrg.com) -- As the nation debates how to control costs as part of health care reform, an Alzheimer's disease researcher says early diagnosis and treatment of the disease could save the nation billions of dollars in costs down the road.

Mark Sager, MD, director of the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Institute (WAI), also says that many of the people who come through the institute's memory-assessment centers want to know if the disease is in their future, even though treatments are limited and there is not yet a cure.

In a recent study published in *Alzheimer's & [Dementia](#)*, Sager, professor of medicine at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, and UW public-policy researcher David Weimer calculated the financial consequences of not providing two interventions: early screening for Alzheimer's disease and caregiver support. The lack of such interventions means that the burden of Alzheimer's care falls largely on the health care system, primarily in the form of long-term care.

"The results were even more shocking than I expected," said Sager. "For example, care for a 70-year-old female Alzheimer's victim in Wisconsin costs \$15,000 a year. Multiply similar numbers across the nation and theoretically you could save billions in Medicaid, Medicare and state aids each year by keeping people in their homes longer."

The economic impact varies depending on age, sex and other factors.

While the analysis applies only to the state of Wisconsin, Sager thinks studies in other states would show similar results.

Sager says his diagnostic clinic group has seen many people who were actually relieved by an early [diagnosis](#) because it gives them a chance to plan. That observation is supported by studies at Washington and Boston universities, showing that people perceive little risks from early Alzheimer's detection.

Another argument for early screening is that current Alzheimer's medications appear to be more effective early in the disease for some people. Sager said the medications don't work as well in advanced cases.

Data from the WAI's memory clinics around the state of Wisconsin show that one out of five people over the age of 65 who are screened has unrecognized cognitive problems.

"We certainly don't wait for someone to get heart disease to test cholesterol levels. Why in the world wouldn't we look at it the same way for [Alzheimer's disease](#)?" Sager said.

As for the surprising research results, Sager says, "There's no longer an excuse not to institute early screening and increase funding for caregiver support."

Provided by University of Wisconsin

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