

Italy launches pioneering project to identify Alzheimer's risk

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Italy on Wednesday launched a pioneering programme to identify people with the highest risk of developing Alzheimer's in the hopes of treating them early, as the country waits for a new wave of more effective drugs.

The screening project known as "Interceptor" aims to better determine who will most benefit from these future treatments, which are expected to be costly and have significant side effects.

"Alzheimer's is a global problem that needs to be, if not solved, at least managed with maximum urgency," Italian Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin said in presenting the programme.

According to Lorenzin, one million people in Italy suffer from dementia, with 600,000 having Alzheimer's.

"These numbers will rise in Europe and in developed countries as the population ages," she added.

With an average age of 44 years and nine months as of 2016, Italy has the oldest population in Europe and the world's second-oldest after Japan.

That prompted Italy's government to take the lead in preparing for more effective drugs expected in 2025, the minister said.

Interceptor researchers will study patients with [mild cognitive](#)

impairment (MCI), which can affect memory and language skills and is often a precursor to dementia or Alzheimer's.

Project supervisor Paolo Maria Rossini said that of the 735,000 Italians who currently have MCI, half will develop Alzheimer's.

"To give this medicine to more than 700,000 people would bankrupt the system in two years," Rossini said.

Interceptor then aims to identify the 50 percent of Italians with the highest risk of developing the disease.

The EU country has committed 3.5 million euros (\$4.1 million) to the 54-week project, which will follow 400 volunteer patients with MCI aged between 50 and 85.

"We will be the first country in the world to have such measures in place before the first drug is introduced," Rossini said.

More than 50 drugs are being developed in the hopes of slowing down or stopping Alzheimer's, a syndrome in which cognitive ability, emotional control, and social behaviour deteriorate.

The World Health Organization estimates that a new case of the incurable disease is diagnosed every four seconds.

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