



**Think Brain  
Health Global**  
ACT EARLY!

## Personal and professional experiences of a forgotten pandemic

**Think Brain Health Global** session highlights from the European Health Forum Gastein



Insights from personal and professional experiences of neurodegenerative diseases were the theme during a European Health Forum Gastein session held last month by Think Brain Health Global, entitled **Brain Health: time to act (Rising to the challenge of a forgotten pandemic)**. The session is now available on the [Think Brain Health Global](#) website and features a series of stimulating and informative discussions highlighting opportunities and unmet needs in areas that are central to the **Think Brain Health Global** initiative.

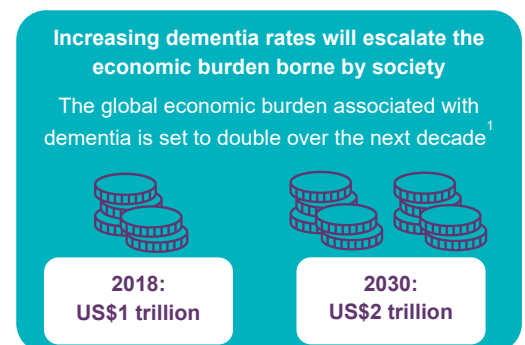
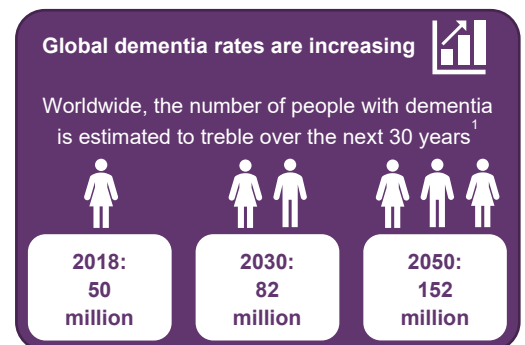
### Dementia represents a substantial and growing public health challenge

The moderator, **Anya Sitaram**, opened the session by asking **Alastair Noyce**, Chair of **Think Brain Health Global**, about the global burden of dementia and the possibility for prevention by modifiable risk factors. Alastair highlighted dementia as the seventh leading cause of mortality worldwide, as well as the growing number of cases and the substantial financial burden associated with it.<sup>1</sup>

In highlighting the work of Think Brain Health Global, he described the philosophy of 'brain health' as making the most of your brain and acting to reduce some of the risks to its health as you age. Addressing these modifiable risks has the potential to reduce dementia rates at the population level by approximately a third. These changes have the greatest potential when made within a **'window of opportunity'** before symptoms manifest.

### Positive brain health changes can help following diagnosis

Author and former neurologist **Dan Gibbs** discussed his personal experience of receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, which is the most common cause of dementia. He told of his positive experience of adopting lifestyle changes including continued aerobic exercise, making changes to his diet, continuing to seek out intellectual and social activities and maintaining a healthy sleep pattern. He also advocated for the need for early recognition and intervention with behavioural changes during the mid-life window of opportunity.



<sup>1</sup>World Alzheimer Report. 2018. Available from: <https://www.alzint.org/u/WorldAlzheimerReport2018.pdf>.





## Continued research and education are required to fully realize the potential for dementia prevention

**Wiesje van der Flier** described how research studies have begun to show the positive impact that targeting multiple modifiable risk factors can have on reducing dementia risk in studies like the **FINGER** (Finnish Geriatric Intervention Study to Prevent Cognitive Impairment and Disability) trial.<sup>2</sup> The ongoing work of the **Worldwide FINGER** programme will seek to determine if similar findings are observed across different global populations. Future studies are also needed to assess the value of digital solutions and the potential impact of social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on those with or at risk of neurodegenerative diseases.

The need for education and effective use of training to bridge theory–practice gaps was discussed with **Ruth Trout**. This bridging will require increased awareness among specialist and non-specialist healthcare professionals about risk factors to allow for conversations that are expanded and linked across areas of healthcare disciplines. This would allow patients who are engaged in a conversation to get additional information about brain health within a more holistic approach to health.

## Action is needed from healthcare policymakers to invigorate brain health programmes

During the final group discussion, **Pawel Świeboda** joined the other presenters and agreed with the need to move away from the idea that dementia is an inevitable part of ageing. He also highlighted a potential role for digital cognitive testing as part of brain health status tracking within integrated brain health programmes.

During the final panel discussion, presenters shared their key areas for future improvements in the care of brain health. These included the need to raise awareness that neurodegenerative diseases begin many years before symptoms manifest and the hope that talking more about dementia would reduce the stigma that still surrounds it and provide a platform to engage with people who are prepared to talk about it. Linking these changes with educating healthcare professionals to have these conversations should empower patients to make changes to preserve their brain health.

In closing, the audience were reminded of key health promotion recommendations from **Think Brain Health Global**:

- Protect and provide the public health budgets to improve public understanding of how to promote brain health
- Encourage behaviours at all ages that help to improve brain health
- Provide a supportive environment that empowers individuals to make important lifestyle changes.

If you were unable to join our session or want to watch it again, the full recording is now available on the [Think Brain Health Global](https://www.thinkbrainhealth.org) website.



<sup>2</sup>Ngandu T *et al.* *Lancet* 2015;385:2255–63.