Can you begin by providing an introduction to your background, as well as explaining what sparked your interest in mental health?

I've worked in the charity sector for many years. Previously, I was Chief Executive at Breakthrough Breast Cancer, UK. During my time there, the organisation worked hard to bring about many changes to improve the lives of those diagnosed with breast cancer. I'm now committed to leading the fight against dementia, making sure the Society speaks up on behalf of people with dementia, ensuring they can access support and bringing treatments closer to those with the condition.

My father had dementia and sadly passed away in 2011. I'm passionate about improving the lives of people with dementia. It’s a condition which for too long has gone unrecognised and under-supported. My hope is that Alzheimer’s Society can be the catalyst to bring about real change for people with dementia.

Do you think there is enough research conducted into mental health and, as the key medical challenge of this generation, specifically dementia?

There is a huge funding gap between dementia and cancer research, with many treatments and research lagging more than a generation behind those for cancer. In fact, there are currently more trials ongoing into hay fever than into some of the most common forms of dementia.

It is unacceptable that dementia research has fallen this far behind. We need to see the field of dementia research thrive and grow, attracting and retaining the world’s best scientists to bring us closer to a cure. Clinical trials are hugely expensive and take years of commitment before discoveries are made. We need more studies exploring the causes of dementia, how to care better for people with the condition in the here and now, and ultimately trials to develop and test a cure for the future.

What more can be done to this end?

Alzheimer’s Society is the third largest charity funder of dementia research in the world and we have just pledged to increase our investment to a minimum of £100 million over the next decade. We fund research into the cause, treatment and prevention of dementia, but we are also a leading funder of care research that aims to improve current care and services for people living with dementia today.

Alzheimer’s Society pioneered public involvement in dementia research and is the only funding body that works with people with dementia, and their carers, to select the best dementia research projects for funding. This unique involvement ensures we only fund research that could have the biggest impact on people’s lives.

But while we continue to fund as much as we can, we rely on our donors, and therefore we also need others to step up and fund more research too. We can’t do this alone.

In a similar vein, do you think there is sufficient awareness of the condition? How can this be enhanced, and what is the importance of this heightened recognition?

Many people still don’t understand dementia, so there needs to be more focus on improving public awareness, as well as ensuring health and care staff receive the training they need to deliver good dementia care and have the confidence to diagnose the condition. People with dementia also need the right care at the end of their lives to allow them to die with dignity.

A key way to tackle the stigma of dementia is to increase public awareness and understanding. That is why we have followed Japan’s ‘Caravan Mate’ programme and are committed to having 1 million people becoming ‘Dementia Friends’, a programme which encourages people to support those living with dementia in their local community by listening and learning more about the condition.

Fundamentally, however, there needs to be more money put into our social care system so people can get the help they need. We’ve seen some progress on this area with a cap on costs, but we are a long way behind where we need to be to properly support people living with dementia.

Despite costing the economy more than cancer and heart disease combined, according to Alzheimer’s society, eight times more is spent on researching cancer than dementia. How can this be explained?

In the 1970s, President Nixon called for a ‘war on cancer’ which saw dramatic increases in investment in research, leading to new treatments and better understanding of the disease. A similar response in the 1980s and 90s to HIV/AIDs also saw huge strides forwards in research into the disease.

The G8 dementia summit (see p132) could be the defining moment for dementia that people look back on many years in the future, as many do now for Nixon’s National Cancer Act. It is shocking that progress in dementia research lags a whole generation behind cancer. Now is the time for action and for governments worldwide to step up and commit to a collaborative plan, and hopefully the G8 dementia summit declaration will be the start of this.

With the number of global sufferers of dementia expected to rise to 135 million by 2050, what preventative or predatory actions can be taken to halt this dramatic increase in incidence?

We have known for some time that what is good for your heart is also good for your head, and that a healthy lifestyle – including a Mediterranean diet and regular exercise – can reduce your chances of developing dementia.

However, the causes of dementia are complex and not well understood, and much more research is needed to understand how these lifestyle
factors, genetics and family history interact. We are currently funding one such study called PREVENT at Imperial College London that will recruit over 100 healthy middle-aged volunteers to start answering these important questions.

There is currently limited evidence that mental exercise can make a difference to reducing your risk of dementia, so if you had to choose between doing a crossword and going for a run our advice would be to put on your jogging shoes!

As we learn more about the lifestyle factors that contribute to dementia, we will also need public health messaging to help bring about positive change in people’s lifestyle choices. The onus shouldn’t just be on people, but on governments too.

How important is cooperation on an international level in the fight against dementia, and what will the international effort to approach the problem entail?

Global collaboration from researchers and governments is vital. By working together to share advances and knowledge, scientists will have more information on which to target their studies and we will hopefully reach a breakthrough more quickly. The Alzheimer’s Disease Genetics Consortium, which doubled the number of genes known to be linked to Alzheimer’s disease, is a prime example of what can be achieved when academics collaborate and combine resources.

While both the UK’s Coalition Government and the previous Labour administration deserve credit for drawing long overdue attention to dementia, a new long-term national dementia strategy for care, support and research is needed.

With these national dementia strategies in place we can then think about sharing best practice and coming up with a global strategy plan that will help us properly tackle dementia and improve care for people around the world.

www.alzheimers.org.uk