The last word: Leading the fight against dementia

Hosted last December at Lancaster House, London, UK, the G8 dementia summit united ministers, researchers and pharmaceutical companies from across the globe. Here, Jeremy Hughes, Chief Executive of Alzheimer’s Society, discusses the Summit’s great importance and the pressing need to make plans a reality.

Bringing together G8 ministers, researchers, pharmaceutical companies and charities from around the world, what is the importance of the G8 dementia summit?

The UK used their G8 presidency to shine an international spotlight on dementia, highlighting both the devastating impact it can have on families and the increasing scale of the problem worldwide. We hope it will be a watershed moment in the way that people think and talk about, and act on, dementia.

At the summit, world leaders realised that as the number of people with dementia increases, governments worldwide must commit to a global solution. They have promised to identify a cure or a disease-modifying therapy for dementia by 2025 and to increase the amount of funding for dementia research.

The importance of the summit will be decided in the work that follows. Strong leadership and words from the top must now be followed by strong action. Particularly, the G8 countries must follow through on commitments to invest in dementia together, to use future G8 and G20 summits to keep dementia in the spotlight and to ensure the World Health Organization (WHO) and the EU make dementia a priority. Each country must also contribute to the legacy events to help make the promises made at the G8 a reality.

Can you shed light on some of the key topics discussed?

Essentially, the leaders from the G8 nations discussed how to develop and shape an effective international response to dementia. We discussed what kinds of care and support can help families live well with dementia, both those affected and their carers. We also looked at the latest research into preventing the condition and what can be done to stimulate greater investment and innovation in dementia research. Finally, we considered what societal adaptations are needed to support an ageing population and reduce the economic burden of dementia.

The summit concluded with the release of a communiqué in which the G8 nations have committed to identify a cure or a disease-modifying therapy for dementia by 2025 and to increase the amount of funding for dementia research – something we have long campaigned for.

Dementia has come out of the shadows and is centre stage, but we must ensure G8 has a lasting legacy. The governments have all committed to updating progress on research every two years, but every month counts for the millions of people living with dementia worldwide.

Do you think the pledge to identify a cure or a disease-modifying therapy for dementia by 2025 is a realistic ambition?

It depends on what happens over the next couple of years. If we can pool all our resources; commit to meaningful, shared steps to drive forward dementia research and agree to a collaborative global action plan; significantly increase investment in dementia research that will transform the lives of people with dementia across the globe; and also attract, develop and retain the best scientists, clinicians and care professionals, then we have an excellent chance of meeting that target.

While the G8 declaration is an excellent start, we need to see some action come out of the summit, and the next few months – including the G8 legacy events – will go a long way to showing us whether this is in fact possible.

How important is cooperation on an international level in the fight against dementia?

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.

Looking to the US and France we can see ambitious plans to tackle dementia. President Obama has set out five goals, including investment in research for the development of effective prevention and treatment approaches for Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias by 2025. France is set to launch its 4th national dementia strategy, which will span another four years and see continued investment in research.

We now need a new long-term national dementia strategy for care and support as well as research to ensure England is equipped to deal with one of the major health challenges of the 21st Century.

What are your hopes for the future of dementia?

Over the next decade we need to see people with dementia and their carers better supported in everyday living. It needs to stop being a ‘second class condition’. At the same time, we need a major drive on research to find a cure. The G8 commitments are a great start. We now need to see the British and other governments worldwide turn these commitments into real change.