The Arthritis Society

The Arthritis Society is on a mission to improve the wellbeing of people living with arthritis, while research for a cure is underway. Here, President and CEO Janet Yale discusses the importance of pain alleviation, the common misconception of arthritis as an older person’s disease, and the need for greater investment in osteoarthritis research.

Your professional background is not in medicine; what inspired you to take up your current position, and what skill sets have you brought to The Arthritis Society?

I have always had a passion for both the public and private not-for-profit sector since the beginning of my career, and have a lot of experience in governance, fundraising and outreach for various not-for-profit organisations. I am a lawyer and economist by training, and have media- and government-related skills that are relevant to any organisation trying to raise its profile and generate media attention. Having spent 25 years in the business world, I have acquired leadership and business capabilities that are relevant to leading organisational change.

After retiring from the corporate sector, I wanted to find an organisation that was looking to change the way it operates. Moreover, I have a personal interest in arthritis as my husband has very severe osteoarthritis in his shoulders. So when the opportunity arose to lead The Arthritis Society, it seemed a great fit both personally and professionally.

How would you describe the mission of The Arthritis Society, and how have you helped to shape this mission during your time as President?

The organisation has been in existence for 65 years and its goal is to empower people to live as well as they can with arthritis while we search for a cure. The Society provides a lot of programmes, support and services, both online and on the ground in our offices throughout Canada, to help people with arthritis manage their disease.

At the same time, we fund research that focuses on finding a cure for arthritis and ways to prevent the disease, as well as its progression, for future generations – we are the largest non-governmental funder for arthritis research in the country. In terms of my contribution, I have helped define the reach and impact the organisation is trying to achieve and effectively communicated this to people with arthritis in Canada.

You have highlighted the organisation’s recent funding of research into the safety and efficacy of medical cannabis as exemplary of its innovative approach. Why do you think this is currently such a pertinent issue?

We have learnt through both our focus group and our own quantitative research that the one thing people with arthritis have in common – notwithstanding the hundreds of different forms of arthritis – is pain. We therefore have to take the alleviation of pain seriously in terms of understanding the causes of pain and conducting research into pain prevention and improved pain treatment. Pain alleviation is the priority for people with arthritis, so it’s a priority for us.

In Canada, about 60 per cent of people who use medical cannabis do so to alleviate arthritis pain. Despite this, there is currently no research taking place in Canada that looks at this link, including what form and dosage of medical cannabis to use and the associated safety implications. The Society is therefore earmarking funding for research in this area so that physicians can be equipped with evidence-based guidance that will help patients with arthritis make informed decisions about whether medical cannabis could be an effective treatment option for them.

Are there any current projects currently being funded that you would like to highlight?

We look to support projects that have the potential to create groundbreaking discoveries and make the biggest difference in the
day-to-day quality of life for people with arthritis. One example is current research into personalised biological implants that can help restore joint mobility without the need for joint replacement surgery. This would be incredible for people with osteoarthritis who – if not a candidate for joint replacement – have no further treatment options.

Are there any widely held misconceptions about this disease that warp people’s perceptions of it?

The main misconception is that arthritis is an older person’s disease and a natural process of ageing. The fact is that there are 4.6 million people with arthritis in Canada who are at all ages and stages of life, including 24,000 children under the age of 18.

Another myth is that pain is not something that should be taken as seriously as the disease. The Society is highlighting that this assertion is not appropriate or acceptable and that managing people’s pain is equally as important as managing the progress of the disease.

What does the future hold for arthritis treatment in Canada? Are there any developments that you are particularly excited about?

There has been great research that has led to the discovery of biologics, which can halt the progression of inflammatory arthritis. These treatments are not a cure, but they can put people in remission from the disease. Such breakthroughs have been amazing – in a generation we’ve been able to treat inflammatory arthritis in a completely different way. However, we haven’t figured out how to prevent the disease, and that’s the next step for inflammatory arthritis.

The main treatment for osteoarthritis, the more prevalent form of arthritis, is joint replacement. Other than that, we have nothing; there are no means to prevent, halt or reverse the degeneration that leads to osteoarthritis. Therefore, for me, the most promising developments are those that are going to create the breakthroughs for osteoarthritis that we have already made for inflammatory arthritis. We need to find ways to introduce cartilage into joints, programme the body to repair its own cartilage, reverse joint damage and eliminate the need for joint replacement – that is where I think the cutting-edge research is happening. Unfortunately, progress in this area is being held back by limited funding; the Society is therefore trying to accelerate investment so that we can see breakthroughs within a generation.

ERASE THE PAIN

In an effort to further understand the disease, The Arthritis Society spoke with thousands of Canadians living with arthritis. These conversations uncovered that the common issue people wanted to address was, overwhelmingly, pain. To tackle this, the Society has launched the Erase the Pain campaign, focusing their pain-alleviation activities on three core areas:

Cure – supporting research programmes that look at the nature of arthritis and potential ways to prevent, test and treat the disease before it takes hold, as well as studies focusing on methods to better treat pain

Care – working to increase the ability of Canadians to access qualified arthritis care in their home communities, rather than in a hospital setting, with specialised arthritis training for healthcare professionals. In the next five years, the Society aims to train 5,000 frontline healthcare workers – from doctors and nurses to pharmacists and physiotherapists – to be uniquely and expertly trained in arthritis management

Community – enhancing the delivery of arthritis information and resources online and in person, and creating safe places for the arthritis community to connect with each other. The organisation is investing in technology that will enable people to access arthritis-related tools, resources and information, and create community conversations with experts and with one another online

WALK TO FIGHT ARTHRITIS

On 7 June 2015, The Arthritis Society will be hosting its annual Walk to Fight Arthritis – the single largest fundraising event that supports the work of the organisation. In 30 communities across Canada, people touched with arthritis – as well as friends, families, colleagues and neighbours – walk to honour those affected by the disease, while demonstrating that movement and walking are critical elements of managing arthritis.

http://walktofightarthritis.ca