

8:04 am ET
Apr 29, 2015

A Vision of a Future Free of Alzheimer's



MADDY DYCHTWALD: It is the year 2025 and it seems like a miracle reminiscent of John F. Kennedy's moonshot. A multi-modality cure for Alzheimer's disease was recently discovered, fast-tracked and approved by the FDA. Not just a prevention (although that came first, back in 2020), but breakthroughs in science and technology have actually caused a reversal of the disease.

Just a decade earlier in 2015, the statistics were alarming and held the potential to create a global pandemic of catastrophic proportions. It was the dark side of the fact that average life expectancy had skyrocketed from age 47 at the start of the 20th century to age 78 by the end of that century. Half of all those over age 85—the fastest-growing segment of the population—had some form of dementia. According to a 2014 Age Wave/Merrill Lynch Study entitled “Health and Retirement: Planning for the Great Unknown,” for the first time, people of all ages cited Alzheimer's disease as the scariest of all disabling diseases in later life. In fact, it was cited more often than cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes combined.

And for good reason. Back then, we didn't even know the cause of the disease let alone how to slow it, prevent it or cure it. And for the sufferers, the progression of the disease got worse over time until memory and judgment faded, followed by vast mood and behavioral changes, and eventually dementia victims had no ability to care for themselves in the most fundamental ways. Yet many often lived up to 20 years after diagnosis...a life sentence for both the victims and their families. The projections for the future were staggering: By the year 2050, more than 115 million people world-wide could be suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

But fast forward to the future when we woke up from that nightmare with a cure that combines advanced stem cell therapeutics, precision pharmaceuticals, trans-cranial direct-current stimulation and a highly specific lifestyle regimen. The results have been phenomenal. Suddenly cognitively impaired older adults who had been either living in long-term-care facilities or at home with around-the-clock caregiving could not only live with dignity but gain back their

ability to remember, think, and live active lives again. And, it transformed the way everyone thinks about aging and the potential for the later years of life.

With the end of Alzheimer's disease, the world has changed for us in some very significant ways.

More than half of all nursing-home beds have been emptied, saving hundreds of billions of dollars for families and governments world-wide.

Tens of millions of caregivers have been unshackled from the burden of providing physical, emotional and financial care to loved ones suffering from the disease. And the health of these caregivers has improved dramatically, giving them a second chance at life.

Research dollars aimed at finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias can now be funneled into finding a solution for other diseases.

Millions of individuals cured of Alzheimer's disease have now come out of the shadows to live independently, be a loving and interdependent part of their families, and find ways to be productive, contributing their wisdom and experience to their communities and society at-large.

The fear of living a long life but being struck down by Alzheimer's disease has now been quashed. It has liberated us all to think about the future through the prism of possibilities which could include work, giving back, time with family and friends and the opportunity to stay active, engaged, and productive.

Of course, this isn't yet fact because we're here in 2015, speculating about the future. However, many share the hope and are working hard to turn that hope into a reality: that one of the biggest fears of aging—Alzheimer's disease and other dementias—can be thought of as a thing of the past by the year 2025.

Maddy Dychtwald is an author and co-founder of Age Wave, a think tank and consultancy.

Original URL: <http://blogs.wsj.com/experts/2015/04/29/a-vision-of-a-future-free-of-alzheimers/>