

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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MEMORANDUM

December 7, 2010

To: Members of the Subcommittee on Health
Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff
Re: Subcommittee Hearing on Alzheimer's Disease

The Subcommittee on Health will hold a hearing on “Alzheimer’s Disease: The Ongoing Challenges,” on Thursday, December 9, 2010, at 10 a.m. in room 2322 of the Rayburn House Office Building.

I. BIOLOGY OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE

Alzheimer’s disease is an “irreversible, progressive brain disease that slowly destroys memory and thinking skills, and eventually even the ability to carry out the simplest tasks.”¹ It is the most common cause of dementia among older people, and NIH estimates that as many as 5.1 million Americans may have Alzheimer’s. This figure is expected to grow to 13.5 million Americans by 2050.²

The hallmark of the physical changes to the brain are known as “plaques” and “tangles”. Both of these are structures of abnormally folded proteins that form in areas of the brain. It is not clear whether these cause damage to the brain or are a byproduct of the damage, but brain cells in the area of these plaques and tangles do not work as well, and begin to die off, causing brain shrinkage in the areas most affected.

¹ National Institute on Aging, U.S. National Institutes on Health. Alzheimer’s Disease Fact Sheet. (online at <http://www.nia.nih.gov/Alzheimers/Publications/adfact.htm>) (accessed December 2, 2010).

² Alzheimer’s Association, “Changing the Trajectory of Alzheimer’s Disease: A National Imperative” (May 2010) (online at http://www.alz.org/documents_custom/trajectory.pdf) (accessed December 6, 2010)

Damage first strikes the areas of the brain that control memory, and problems in memory are the first symptoms to be noticed in early stages of Alzheimer's disease. As damage progresses to other areas of the brain, problems with other brain function develops as well, and severe Alzheimer's disease can affect every part of the brain, and every part of mental function.

The exact causes of Alzheimer's disease are not well understood. But a significant body of research indicates that genetics and lifestyle factors can play a role. The nature of these contributing factors, and whether any such factors can be modified, is an area of active research.

II. TREATMENT AND FINANCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Current treatments focus on modifying the progression of the disease and helping manage symptoms. Medications are used to treat Alzheimer's disease, and may help maintain cognitive function. No drugs to date can change the underlying disease process. Other drugs are used to manage the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, in particular the agitation, anxiety and depression that accompanies the disease.

One of the key problems facing families of people with Alzheimer's is the devastating financial consequences. People with even mild Alzheimer's disease can require home care or other support. People with severe Alzheimer's disease can require long term care such as nursing home or other institutional care. The estimated annual cost of treating an individual with Alzheimer's disease ranges from \$18,500 to more than \$36,000.³ Further, the total cost of care is expected to rise from approximately \$172 billion in 2010 to more than \$1 trillion in 2050.⁴ This figure includes expenditures for Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance out-of-pocket costs and uncompensated care.

III. WITNESSES

The following witnesses have been invited to testify:

Marcelle Morrison-Bogorad, Ph.D.

Director, Division of Neuroscience
National Institute on Aging
National Institutes of Health

Harry Johns

President and Chief Executive Officer
Alzheimer's Association

³ Alzheimer's Foundation of America, Alzheimer's Cost Fact Sheet.

(online at <http://www.alzfdn.org/AboutAlzheimers/cost.html>) (accessed December 6, 2010).

⁴ Alzheimer's Association, "Changing the Trajectory of Alzheimer's Disease: A National Imperative" (May 2010) (online at http://www.alz.org/documents_custom/trajectory.pdf) (accessed December 6, 2010)

Eric J. Hall

President and Chief Executive Officer
Alzheimer's Foundation of America

Marc Cantillon, MD

Executive Director, Coalition Against Major Disease
Critical Path Institute