Low levels of education one of key risk factors for dementia

A report, commissioned by The Alzheimer Society of Ireland and authored by the Institute of Public Health Ireland (IPHI), has revealed if key risk factors for dementia - such as low levels of education and unhealthy lifestyles - had been addressed through public policy initiatives there could be more than 1000 fewer people living with dementia in Ireland today.

The ASI report entitled: ‘Brain Health and Dementia Prevention in Ireland’ calls for the concept of ‘brain health’ to be used to inform government policies geared at minimising early school leaving and promoting a healthy lifestyle which, it believed, could prove significant in reducing dementia risk at population level.

Research has shown that a low level of education is associated with increased dementia risk in later life. Increased levels of education can not only delay the early symptoms of dementia, but may also slow down the development of the condition.

While acknowledging that not all dementia can be prevented, the paper generated population risk factors for later life dementia using the estimated 2011 dementia prevalence rate for Ireland and prevalence of risk factors measured in the SLAN (Survey on Lifestyle and Attitudes to Nutrition) report.

The IPHI estimated what a 10pc reduction in the seven known risk factors could have meant for prevalence of dementia in Ireland based on 2011 data, taking into account that these risk factors tend to cluster together. The seven risk factors are; low education, diabetes, smoking, depression, physical inactivity, midlife obesity, and high blood pressure.

Broken down, the study estimated that low level education was a potential factor for 18pc of dementia prevalence in Ireland in 2011. The findings indicate had the level of low education been reduced by 10pc over the lifetime of the population this could have resulted in 715 fewer cases. If smoking, which is associated with an increased risk of developing dementia, had been reduced by the same amount this could have cut numbers by 594. Decreasing physical inactivity could have cut cases by 615, while almost 4pc of dementia cases could potentially have been avoided if obesity in mid life had been reduced at population level. Taking into account the fact that these risk factors may occur together if all seven risk factors were modified by 10pc there could have been 1084 fewer cases of dementia in 2011.

The study has prompted urgent calls from The Alzheimer Society of Ireland for dementia prevention to be integrated into national public health programmes, now alongside other major non communicable diseases (NCDs) as we fight the growing prevalence of this condition.

There are currently 48,000 people living with dementia in Ireland, this is expected to reach around 140,000 by 2041. Next year alone, some 4,000 people will develop dementia - 11 people a day. The average annual cost per person with dementia in Ireland is estimated at 40,500, with the economic cost of the illness estimated at 1.7bn in 2010.

The ASI says the discussion paper now raises serious questions around which policy initiatives have the potential to reduce our risk of dementia. While recognising that affecting change through modifying risk factors by even 10pc would pose a serious challenge, the authors argue that it is not beyond the reach of some current public health policies, such as tobacco control which aims to reduce smoking rates from 20pc to 5pc by 2025.

Tina Leonard, Head of Advocacy and Public Affairs at The Alzheimer Society of Ireland said: “Prevention and health promotion policy has to start to include dementia. Current health promotion in Ireland ignores modifiable risk factors for dementia. For example, the Department of Health’s Tobacco Free Policy highlights the associations between smoking and premature mortality, cancers and respiratory diseases but not the established links between smoking and dementia. This paper is a valuable contribution to the Government’s commitment to promote a better understanding of dementia including modifiable risk factors which features in the National Dementia Strategy.”

“there is also a strong link between staying in education and reduced risk of dementia in later life which could be addressed by minimising early school leaving. We are calling on the Government to take heed of these findings and mobilise public health approaches now as we fight to reduce the prevalence of dementia,” she added.

Dr Helen McAvoy, Director of Policy, Institute of Public Health in Ireland said: “The findings indicate that public policies aimed at reducing smoking, enhancing physical activity as well as fostering educational attainment could play an important role in addressing risk of dementia at population level. With the publication of Ireland’s first National Dementia Strategy it is important to further expand our understanding of modifiable risk factors and move toward identifying and testing interventions to reduce dementia risk in Ireland. There is scope to introduce the concept of brain health into how we address aspects of public health policy, research and practice.”