



Is Someone You Care For Becoming Forgetful?

Who's who in dementia care

If you are concerned about yourself or somebody close to you and start to have these concerns investigated, you will need to meet a number of different healthcare professionals. Each person will be responsible for different aspects of the condition and care. This is often referred to as the multi-professional team approach to dementia. To get the best care possible it is important to understand the different roles that each of these people play.

General Practitioner

If you are concerned that you or someone you care for may be showing early signs of Alzheimer's Disease, the first step is to make an appointment with the GP. The GP or family doctor takes an overview of the person and their surroundings and will assess the concerns. The GP assesses the situation on a physical, psychological and social basis and though the GP can make a diagnosis, will usually refer the individual to a specialist for further assessment.

In the event of a referral to a specialist, a letter will be provided outlining the history, findings of physical examination, the medical and social background of the person. This may include very important non-medical information such as occupation, number of dependants, carer support and will give the specialist an overview of the supports that may be required.

If a diagnosis is made, the GP will be advised of this by the specialist and the GP will take over the ongoing management of the person's care in the community. If a problem or difficulty arises, the GP will decide whether or not they can deal with it, and if not, refer the person back to the specialist.

Specialists

Geriatrician

A geriatrician is a medical doctor specialising in the diagnosis, treatment and management of illnesses of older age. Geriatricians are specialists in the failure of memory and the deterioration of mental functions and investigate the underlying reasons for these changes. They work as part of a community based team usually comprising of nurses, occupational therapists, social workers and sometimes physiotherapists. Persons over 65 years old will generally be referred to a geriatrician.

Neurologist

A neurologist is a medical doctor specialising in the diagnosis, treatment and management of disorders of the brain and nervous system, especially those which affect movement and consciousness. Neurologists look after conditions relating to the central nervous system such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, migraine etc and normally work in larger hospitals where the scanning equipment needed for testing is readily available. Persons under 65 years old will generally be referred to a neurologist.

Psychiatrist of Old Age (of Later Life)

A psychiatrist of old age is a doctor who specialises in the mental health problems of the elderly. A psychiatrist of old age will have a great deal of experience in diagnosing dementia and advising on the problems associated with the disease.

Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist is a doctor who specialises in diagnosing and treating a wide range of mental health problems, especially those of thinking and mood. Their assessment of a person can be particularly helpful in those cases where severe depression may be causing symptoms similar to those of dementia, making diagnosis difficult. Persons under 65 may be referred to a psychiatrist.

Clinical Psychologist

A clinical psychologist is a person who assesses memory, learning ability and other mental functions. They will often conduct an interview in which a range of tests are administered. These give a good indication of the person's mental abilities and difficulties. A clinical psychologist will also often offer support and counselling.

Public Health Nurse

The public health nurse is a qualified general nurse and is based in the community working out of the local health centre. The public health nurse calls on persons in their own home (on a regular basis if required), assesses their needs and coordinates support services if required. Based on an individual's needs, the public health nurse can link into local supports by making referrals to facilities such as day care and home care where available. They can also access supports such as home help, care attendants, personal assistants, twilight care staff, meals on wheels and respite care. The public health nurse can also assess and advise on incontinence wear and products. The public health nurse liaises with the GP and also performs basic nursing duties such as changing dressings.

Social Worker

As part of the multi-professional team based in the hospital, the social worker provides skilled psychosocial support to persons with dementia and their carers. The social worker can access a wide-range of services in both the voluntary and statutory sectors. They have an advocacy role in determining that the needs of the person with dementia and their family are highlighted and met. They ensure the individual is viewed in the context of their overall family and community environment. A person with dementia or a family member can ask to be referred to a social worker by the hospital consultant. In addition, there are now social workers based in the community in some health board areas and these can be accessed through the GP or public health nurse.

Occupational Therapist

The occupational therapist works to enable and empower people to maintain physical abilities and remain independent in their daily activities. This will include looking at and finding ways to improve and/or compensate for any deficits relating to the symptoms of the dementia. Examples of areas an occupational therapist may look at include difficulty getting in or out of a bath, managing stairs, furniture layout, etc. They can advise on practical aspects such as adaptations/alterations to the home or specialised equipment to maximise independence in addition to assisting in the application for the Disabled Person's Housing Adaptation Grant.