The British Psychological Society: understanding the psychological dimensions of dementia to improve care
Meeting summary

Overview
While there has been a significant increase in the awareness and understanding of the personal and social impact of dementia in recent years, there is an urgent need for further action to improve care and support for people living with dementia.

The British Psychological Society (BPS) held a meeting with parliamentarians and other key stakeholders in Parliament on 29th November 2017 to discuss how the interventions and frameworks of understanding that psychology provides can help healthcare professionals, carers and policy-makers improve the care and support available for people living with dementia. A summary of the key discussion points and conclusions are detailed below.

Discussion summary

Prevention and reducing the risk of developing dementia
- Lifestyle factors contribute significantly to the risk of developing dementia.
- A psychological approach can contribute to the development of programmes aimed at reducing these risks – for example encouraging healthy lifestyles through behaviour change.
- Building mental resilience and helping people maintain social interaction is also important.

Assessment, diagnosis and early intervention
- Early diagnosis and intervention are vital. Early intervention can lead to a 25% reduction in the exacerbation of dementia symptoms.
- There needs to be greater awareness of dementia and the importance of early diagnosis and intervention, particularly amongst GPs who are often the first point of contact for patients presenting symptoms.
- A detailed neuropsychological assessment is required to achieve early diagnosis and is essential to supporting the selection of appropriate early interventions.
- People need help and support to deal with the sense of loss, anxiety and fear that they may feel when they are first diagnosed with dementia.

Treatment and support for people living with dementia
- The psychological aspects of dementia are significant and a more person-centered approach to dementia care and support is required to help people to live well with dementia. Currently care provision is often very stretched and does not allow for a person-centered approach to care.
- Multidisciplinary teams, which include psychologists, are key to ensuring the best possible outcomes for people with dementia.
- There is a huge variation in access to appropriate services which is a significant issue.
- Social isolation is high among people with dementia. It is concerning that 1 in 10 people admitted to hospital with dementia live alone, and the rates in London are double this.
- Social interaction is key to combatting the impact of isolation, however local authorities have insufficient funding available to make appropriate provisions. Reductions in local authority funding has had a significant impact on many of the local initiatives and services that were providing support to people with dementia.
- The future review of the Mental Capacity Act provides a key opportunity to ensure better understanding and allowance of issues relating to consent and capacity.
The role of families and carers

- Family members and carers play a crucial role in providing care for people living with dementia, helping to reduce the need for institutional care which is often costly.
- There is currently a lack of support for carers which needs to be urgently addressed. Looking after carers is essential to ensuring the quality of care for people living with dementia.
- Carers come from a diverse range of backgrounds and therefore have complex needs which need to be taken into account when ensuring they are given appropriate support.
- People with dementia and their families or carers often experience difficulty navigating the benefits system. There is often an issue with a lack of awareness amongst assessors of dementia which can make the process particularly distressing.
- Support and education for relatives needs to be increased to improve their understanding of the short, medium and long-term impacts of dementia and to signpost appropriate local resources.

Investing in psychological research to improve clinical practice

- Psychological research has made an important contribution to improving the understanding of the profound impact dementia has on the people who live with the condition and their families. It has also helped to inform the approach to diagnosing and treating the condition.
- However, psychological research into dementia is limited and more investment in research is needed in order to improve practice and address gaps in the provision of services.

Key recommendations

- A psychological approach is needed to enable people to make sustainable changes in behaviour and adopt healthier lifestyles.
- As part of the diagnostic process, access to timely and prompt psychological assessment, including specialist neuropsychological assessment, is essential.
- Improving people’s experience of dementia means ensuring that their care and treatment is individually tailored to their needs throughout the dementia journey.
- People with dementia should be supported in making their own decisions as far as possible. When this is not possible, their wishes, feelings, values and beliefs should be taken into account, in consultation with carers, to the greatest extent possible in order to make decisions in their best interests.
- People with dementia should have the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities, and be part of a local community that is dementia-friendly and fully supportive.
- To ensure the best possible outcomes for people with dementia, those receiving care in hospitals and care homes should have access to multi-agency, multi-disciplinary teams which include psychologists.
- Families and carers should be included in care planning and should have access to psychological support.
- Greater investment should be made in psychological research to improve practice and deliver excellence in dementia care.
- Psychologists should be involved in training and supporting a workforce able to deliver excellence in dementia care.

About the British Psychological Society

The British Psychological Society (BPS) is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK, responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and practical applications of the discipline.

The Society supports and enhances the development and application of psychology for the greater public good. We set high standards for research, education, and knowledge, and seek to disseminate these to increase wider public awareness of psychology and its importance. As part of this work we want to ensure that the value of psychology to society is recognised by policymakers and used to inform policy development across government.

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