

The unsung heroes

Celebrating dementia care through the National Dementia Awards

CHRISTIAN BORG XUEREB

Dementia is an umbrella term for several symptoms that are characterised by a decline in mental ability, which becomes severe enough to influence and interfere with a person's daily living.

These appear on a continuum, ranging from mild to severe dementia. These symptoms are caused by a number of mental illnesses, the most common of which is dementia of the Alzheimer's type, also known as Alzheimer's Disease, which accounts for 60 to 80 per cent of the known cases. Vascular dementia, which commonly occurs after a stroke, is the second most common type. Unfortunately, most of these conditions are progressive and a cure is still not available for the most common forms of dementia.

The most prevalent initial symptoms that fall under the term of dementia are usually those associated with short-term memory (such as difficulty in keeping track of bills or planning and preparation of meals or travelling), problems in communication and use of language, reasoning and judgement as well as difficulty in focusing and paying attention.

It is important to keep in mind that getting older does not necessarily mean that one will get dementia.

People with dementia need help relative to the stage they are in. Most often, this support is provided by family members, who sometimes need support for their own health issues. Without these carers, the person with dementia is at risk of having a lower quality of life and end up having to enter long term residential care at an earlier stage, instead of benefitting from community care for a longer span of time. In addition, when someone is diagnosed with having a type of dementia, the attention and care is usually focused on the person with dementia, and unfortunately the forgotten person is the primary caregiver.



In 2018, there were around 7,000 people diagnosed with some type of dementia in Malta, all of whom are supported by formal and informal caregivers. This number is estimated to double by 2050 due to population ageing. This will in turn, increase exponentially the caregiving needs. The support and caregiving provided comes at the price of increased distress and a risk of lower quality of life for the informal caregiver. The higher levels of distress is also seen among formal caregivers, due to the increasing demand on the professionals.

The Parliamentary Secretariat for Persons with Disability and Active Ageing has thus launched, on July 3, 2019, the National Dementia Awards to celebrate and thank the altruistic gestures and the monumental dedication and sacrifice undertaken by these unsung heroes that work in every dementia caregiving sector; professionals, individuals,

family members and organisations that work and care for people with dementia and their significant others.

These awards are going to be held on a yearly basis and will form part of other celebrations that will take place in September, the month dedicated for dementia.

There will be three categories of awards. The first one is the award for exceptional contribution in dementia. This is open for persons that gave or are giving exceptional contributions to the field of dementia and not necessarily associated with direct caregiving of

persons with dementia. For example, researchers or activists in the field that strive to raise awareness and reduce stigma towards dementia. The second category is the award for informal carer, which is open for the person who is the primary caregiver, usually a family member or significant other who is directly taking care of the person with dementia. The third category is the award for a professional or team of professionals that work formally in the field of dementia.

The deadline to submit nominations for these awards is August 7, 2019 and the applications can be found either from local councils or the dedicated active ageing website www.activeageing.gov.mt. •

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