

future time bomb?



John Suchet, renowned newscaster, launched his campaign for more Admiral Nurses to be made available nationwide at a conference hosted at North Holmes Campus.

“My wife Bonnie was diagnosed with dementia in February 2006. It changed our lives. I was fortunate to have access to an Admiral Nurse. When I found out that there

are only around 70 Admiral Nurses in England and Wales, none in Scotland or Northern Ireland, and that I only had access to one because I happened to live in an area where the local NHS Trust provides them, I decided to do something about it. Every copy sold of my book about my ‘love story’ with Bonnie will bring a donation to Dementia UK.

It is estimated that there are currently 700,000 people with dementia in the UK. By 2021 the number is forecast to increase by 38% and by 154% by 2051. Dementia is already a serious problem and set to be an even bigger problem in the future.

Alzheimer’s disease accounts for 62% of all dementias. Whilst it is likely that both genes and environmental factors combine in some way to trigger Alzheimer’s, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, obesity and diabetes are all independent risk factors for the development of Vascular Dementia.

The lifestyles of many young people growing up now are paving the way for suffering some form of dementia in the future. Lack of exercise, eating processed food, smoking and drinking all combine to store up trouble ahead.

Leading the research into better care for sufferers and their carers is Penny Hibberd, Director of Dementia Services Development Centre South East (DSDC), based at the University.

Since taking over as Director of DSDC in January, Penny has been concentrating on developing partnerships with other dementia specialists across the region to provide a comprehensive approach to dementia care.

The recent teaming with the Avante Partnership, which provides residential and domiciliary care, and Dementia UK, which supplies the specialist dementia training and a network of support groups for carers, brings a practical aspect of care. Dementia UK also supports the Admiral Nurses, who are specialist nurses who work with carers and families of people with dementia.

The DSDC has also created Honorary positions from colleagues at the Universities of Kent and Surrey, and together they provide an academic platform for educational programmes, research and organisational development projects.

As an Admiral Nurse herself, Penny is more than aware of the need to support carers as well as the sufferer. Her own research particularly focussed on how Admiral Nurses can empower carers by giving them knowledge, skills and understanding of their own and the sufferer’s emotional state. “Dementia touches the whole population,” Penny explains. “Everyone in time will meet someone or knows someone who has dementia. In fact there are 21,000 sufferers in Kent alone. It’s a frightening statistic.

“Recognising someone has dementia in the first place is key to giving them the right treatment. The DSDC is developing new training programmes for professionals and assistant practitioners in acute and primary care settings and in domiciliary, residential and nursing homes.

“Providing Admiral Nurses to support carers and families can help enormously. They can help them to understand dementia and how to manage the symptoms and changing abilities of the person they are caring for. For instance a trip to a restaurant can be quite traumatic if the person with dementia becomes agitated at having to wait for food to arrive. A six foot husband thumping the table because he is having to wait can be very alarming. This can be eased by warning the restaurant ahead of time that this might happen so everyone is prepared and knows how to react.

“Forewarned places can be very helpful. There was one gentleman whose wife was quite able to push the trolley around the supermarket while he put things into it. One day he left her in an aisle for a few moments to get something and when he came back she had walked out of the doors with the unpaid trolley. Security staff surrounded her and it was all very distressing. Now, however, they actually have a staff member who helps them with their shop. So it is pre-empting events to avoid awkward situations.

“We are lucky because we have some very good services in our region. Training has got better and people are really striving to improve things. We need to keep talking about the future for people and families living with dementia. In this way, as with cancer 40 years ago, things can only get better.” ●