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Changing the narrative: Alzheimer's Disease in the UAE

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Introduction

This policy brief outlines the current state of Alzheimer's care in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a neurodegenerative and progressive chronic condition that weakens cognitive abilities, resulting in a loss of autonomy and functionality. AD is the most common form of dementia.

The UAE has some of the highest dementia care costs in the Middle East, totalling US$1.35bn (0.19% of GDP) annually.[1] The prevalence of dementia is approximately 1.33% among individuals aged 50 and older and 4.09% among those aged 60 and older.[2] The UAE is expected to see a 1,795% increase in people living with dementia by 2050.[2]



> **"There are ways that you can have a dignified way of life for Alzheimer's patients."**
>
> **Desiree Vlekken**, Founder and CEO, 4get-me-not Alzheimer's, Dubai, UAE

The country's health and social care systems need to prepare to respond to this increase in AD cases. Ensuring that robust diagnostic protocols that utilise innovative techniques such as biomarkers are in place, with referral pathways to ensure that people with AD get the evidence-based care and support they need. **Collaboration between academia, the private sector and government** will enable the UAE to drive improvements in dementia prevention and comprehensive care.

Areas of focus for policymakers in the UAE

- **Create policy and clinical guidelines with pathways to guide evidence-based diagnosis and care**—Develop and implement a national-level AD policy to prepare for the impacts of an ageing population. At a clinical level, develop and implement national-level AD clinical guidelines that include referral pathways to guide diagnosis and care that reflects current best available evidence.
- **Prepare and equip the healthcare workforce**—Enhance training in the healthcare workforce to improve management, care and support for people with AD, particularly in primary care.
- **Educate to correct misconceptions**—Address misconceptions and stigma around AD in the general public to enhance awareness of AD, communicate the benefits of early diagnosis and encourage treatment seeking.

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> **"We need to educate people about Alzheimer's and dementia."**
>
> **Abdulrazak Abyad**, Consultant, Internal Medicine and Geriatrics, Dar Al Shifa Hospital, Kuwait; CEO, Abyad Medical Center, Tripoli, Lebanon; Chairman, Middle East Academy for Medicine of Ageing

Current snapshot

This table provides an overview of the UAE's AD policy landscape, identifying key areas for improvement. The existence of policy does not guarantee effective implementation.

Yes Partly No

National AD plan

The UAE has no national AD plan or policy.

AD awareness campaigns

Charitable organisations such as 4get-me-not Alzheimer's run campaigns in Dubai and are looking to expand to all of the emirates in the UAE.[3] The UAE's Ministry of Health and Prevention has been raising awareness on AD through mass media campaigns.[33] However, stigma around AD remains an issue and can negatively impact those diagnosed with the disease and their caregivers.

Clinical guidelines

There are currently no national AD clinical guidelines, although the health ministry is in talks with the World Health Organisation (WHO) to create them.[4]

Patient support & advocacy

Older people are often supported by family and informal caregivers.

Healthcare workforce & training

Although training programmes exist, according to interviewees these are not universal within initial and ongoing medical training, offering opportunities for curriculum enhancement.

Research & development

According to a study exploring progress and telemedicine in the Middle East, the UAE ranks third for publication activity in digital health research.[5] Although research and development is generally funded and overseen by the government, AD research remains a lower priority and therefore private practitioners seeking to conduct AD research often resort to funding their own research, which can prove challenging.

Thriving in society

In 2016 Sharjah, one of the seven emirates in the UAE, became the first Arab city to join the WHO's Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities.[6,7,8] Sharjah can serve as a model for other UAE cities in terms of best practices and effective adaptation.

AD registry

There is no publicly available AD registry. However, the Emirati Genome Project—which has sequenced the genetic makeup of 800,000+ residents—could provide a technical framework to inform the creation of an AD registry.[9]

Source: Economist Impact analysis

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Key takeaways

Collect data for an evidence-based policy response to AD

The UAE is expected to see a rapid rise in its already ageing population owing to increasing life expectancy and its appeal as a retirement hub. The proportion of people aged 60 and over is expected to rise from 3.1% in 2020 to 19.7% by 2050, whereas the proportion aged 15-24 is expected to rise from 11.2% to only 12% in the same timeframe.[10] Approximately 90% of the UAE's population are expatriates, most of whom reside in the country under a working visa. A 2024 survey of people working in the UAE found that that 70% of workers plan to retire in the country.[11,12] The increasing proportion of older adults in the UAE is projected to lead to a rise in AD prevalence, with resulting impacts on health and social care resources.[13,14]

The UAE has created a National Policy for Senior Emiratis, led by the Ministry of Community Empowerment, to respond to the evolving needs of the country's ageing population; however, the policy does not mention AD or dementia.[15,16] The experts we spoke to recommended that the UAE develops a policy or national plan for AD to guide a coordinated and evidence-based response. Aisha Zayed Al Ali, managing director of the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, recommends a holistic approach that includes screening, public health and awareness campaigns, and continuous funding and training programmes for primary care physicians. To create such a holistic policy would require the involvement of a range of multidisciplinary stakeholders across different areas of government, industry and academia, as well as patients/caregivers.

The WHO provides a database of AD plans and policies in various countries; the government could use this as a source of learning on best practices. In addition, relevant policymakers could reach out to counterparts in countries with established plans to gain insights from their experiences, building international relationships and boosting the UAE's commitment to addressing AD.[17] Policymakers could also make use of existing WHO guidance on what policy and legislation is required to respond to and prepare for AD in an ageing population, as well as seeking direct policymaking support from WHO regional teams.[18,19] In 2024 the health ministry began talks with the WHO to collaborate on developing a national AD response plan, a significant step forward in tackling AD and providing better healthcare outcomes.[20,21]

Sahail AlRukn, a consultant neurologist at Mediclinic City Hospital in Dubai, highlights that the UAE lacks epidemiological data on dementia and AD.[22] The absence of data prevents policymakers from accurately understanding the scope of the disease, hindering evidence-based resource allocation and prioritisation. Caline Jadam, a consultant neurologist at Dubai's American Center for Psychiatry and Neurology, put it simply: "We cannot change what we can what we cannot measure."

The UAE National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031 includes the establishment of a National Wellbeing Observatory that will monitor wellbeing indicators, report to the Cabinet, propose government training programmes, establish an Academy of Wellbeing, and form a National Wellbeing Council to oversee the strategy.[23] AD-related indicators could be incorporated into the Observatory, or its technical architecture could be used to inform the development of a national AD registry.



"We cannot change what we cannot measure."

Caline Jadam, Consultant Neurologist, American Center for Psychiatry and Neurology, Dubai, UAE

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However, the government has published no updates on the development of the National Wellbeing Observatory since its approval in 2019.

The creation of a holistic national plan for dementia/AD would enable the UAE government to identify and define priorities for action, with the aim of strengthening national preparedness and resilience as the AD burden rises. Setting up an AD registry would further support this action by providing the data required to support evidence-based resource allocation and priority-setting.

Increase primary care training to enhance care and reduce caregiver burden

Many older people in the UAE receive care from their children or extended family networks, rather than from trained caregivers.[24,25] "Families generally care for their older family members," says Abdulrazak Abyad, chairman of the Middle East Academy for Medicine of Ageing. "You rarely find an older person without support from the family." Experts we spoke to expressed concern that informal caregivers might lack specific skills or training, especially as the disease progresses. The responsibility for providing this care can also have a negative impact on family members and can lead to higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety.[26]

Primary care staff are the first point of contact within the health service for people with AD. Yet the experts we spoke to felt that primary care staff lack training in identifying AD and there is a lack of guidance on referral pathways. Organisations such as the Middle East Academy for Medicine of Aging have worked to bridge this gap by running courses on dementia; however, such courses do not seem to have been available in recent years.[27] There is a need to enhance AD coverage in initial and continuing medical training across the healthcare workforce. According to Dr Abyad, the training of primary care staff is especially important, given there is a shortage in AD specialists in the UAE.

Alzheimer's International offers an accreditation programme for organisations and training programmes.[28] The Commission for Academic Accreditation, a body that operates under the Ministry of Education, could work with organisations like Alzheimer's International and 4get-me-not Alzheimer's to ensure that there is appropriate AD-related content in medical curricula. Similarly, the Dubai Health Authority, the Abu Dhabi department of Health and the UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention could collaborate to develop continuing medical education resources that help general practitioners (GPs) stay up to date with advances in AD treatment and care.[29,30]

There are also international examples that the UAE could draw inspiration from. For example, the UK's General Practitioners with Expanded Roles programme, which includes dementia, offers training to GPs seeking to undertake a role that is beyond the scope of the standard GP curricula.[31] UAE authorities could engage organisations like the UK's Royal College of General Practitioners to use lessons learned learn from its primary care AD training when creating a programme tailored to the needs of UAE primary care staff.



"We need to educate more primary care physicians, because we do not have enough geriatricians."

Abdulrazak Abyad, Consultant, Internal Medicine and Geriatrics, Dar Al Shifa Hospital, Kuwait; CEO, Abyad Medical Center, Tripoli, Lebanon; Chairman, Middle East Academy for Medicine of Ageing

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> **"Training and awareness are crucial—the truth is, [currently] we don't make the patients better. We only help them stay where they are for a little longer."**
>
> **Derk Krieger**, Consultant Neurologist, Dubai, UAE

> **"There is a reverence for older adults, which encompasses religious, cultural and social values, denoting a clear responsibility that families have to take care of the older family members."**
>
> **Nicole Sirotin**, CEO, Institute for Healthier Living Abu Dhabi

Overall, there is a need for greater formal integration of AD education into medical training and continuing medical education, with a focus on primary care as a key point of contact. The creation of a holistic AD policy that incorporates medical education would serve to formalise and co-ordinate this activity, and create funding pathways, to ensure consistent and high-quality training for relevant staff.

Promote public awareness and reduce stigma to encourage support-seeking

AD is widely misunderstood by the general public in the UAE and globally. Stigma of AD can negatively impact those diagnosed with the disease and their caregivers, leading to low self-esteem, isolation and poor mental health.[32]

Experts we spoke to indicated that such stigma can cause people to go to extreme lengths to conceal their diagnosis, resulting in reduced healthcare utilisation. Nicole Sirotin, CEO of the Institute for Healthier Living Abu Dhabi, believes that the UAE is not unique in this; however, she does see attitudes changing within the UAE as people learn more about the disease through public awareness campaigns.

Even the term "dementia", holds negative connotations—in Arabic, the word is translated as ḵarah, which can also be interpreted as "unravelling" or "losing one's mind".[33] Desiree Vlekken, the CEO and founder of 4get-me-not Alzheimer's, describes people having a strong aversion to even mentioning the word, which perpetuates stigma around the disease.

The health ministry has engaged in various activities to raise awareness of AD. These include events around World Alzheimer's Day, such as lighting up Dubai with purple lights, as well as mass media campaigns, such as those launched in 2017 and 2019, to promote early diagnosis and raise public awareness around advances in disease treatment.[34,35]

On World Alzheimer's Day 2021, the health ministry launched a "memory café" designed to offer emotional, educational and social support for people with dementia and their caregivers.[36] Dr AlRukn sees memory clinics as a promising intervention to support people's memory and cognitive function, but says that they are underutilised in the UAE. Derk Krieger, a consultant neurologist working in Dubai, is also supportive of memory clinics, but stresses the need for established standards to ensure that they are staffed with appropriately trained professionals.

In 2017 the Dubai Health Authority created a community-driven support group to raise awareness of AD and early detection. Group meetings have been held in malls to increase foot traffic, and its services also include a telephone helpline.[37]

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These campaigns and support services represent a commitment to raising awareness of AD, the importance of early detection and educating people about treatment options. Such public education is vital to ensure that people are aware of the early signs and know where and how they can seek support, as well as to help in addressing stigma and misconceptions. In particular, says Dr Jadam, the value of early detection and intervention needs to be communicated to the public, motivating people to seek diagnosis and support. Dr AlRukn emphasises the social/economic gains for individuals and the government through, for example, people being able to continue working for longer.



"People still think that Alzheimer's is a normal part of ageing, but it's not."

Desiree Vlekken, Founder and CEO, 4get-me-not Alzheimer's, Dubai, UAE

"We know that the majority of Alzheimer's symptoms are irreversible, but they can be delayed. People should know that these symptoms can be delayed."

Aisha Ibrahim Zayed Al Ali, Managing Director, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, Dubai, UAE

Although campaigns around World Alzheimer's Day are valuable in raising awareness, creating and adopting a comprehensive national strategy would offer a more coordinated and sustainable long-term solution that would have impact beyond disparate campaigns.

Provide clear guidelines to support evidence-based detection and management

There have been significant advances in recent years in terms of diagnostics and treatments for AD. Dr AlRukn notes that AD has evolved from a challenging-to-diagnose and untreatable disease, to one that can be diagnosed early and whose progression can be slowed down. describes how "Currently, unfortunately, we either wait for the problem to happen and then we diagnose the disease, and we try to intervene if it's early stages of Alzheimer's disease," says Laila Abdel Wareth, CEO of the National Reference Laboratory. "If it is in the later stages of the disease, we basically provide supportive care and palliative measures." The experts we spoke to all emphasised the need for early intervention to maximise quality of life. Healthcare professionals and the general public both need to be aware of the benefits of diagnosis and potential treatments.

Recent advances in biomarkers have enabled diagnosis at an earlier stage of the disease, enabling earlier intervention. This "fantastic breakthrough" has made diagnosing AD almost "as simple as measuring your cholesterol level", says Dr Wareth. Given the underdiagnosis of AD in the UAE, both Dr AlRukn and Dr Jadam feel strongly that some of the unmet needs can be tackled through age-based AD screening and through mass awareness campaigns. Clinical guidelines and referral pathways are also needed in the UAE to enable healthcare professionals to raise awareness of these tools and their appropriate use.

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"We are trained and ready to serve our patients, ready to treat them, but we still need better referral pathways to be able to reach and serve the largest number of patients possible."

Caline Jadam, Consultant Neurologist, American Center for Psychiatry and Neurology, Dubai, UAE

Summary of key policy takeaways and opportunities for AD care and prevention in the UAE

Collect data to prepare an **evidence-based policy** response to AD

Support **high quality, evidence-based diagnosis and care** with robust clinical guidelines

Increase **primary care training** to enhance care and reduce caregiver burden

Promote **public awareness** and reduce stigma to encourage support-seeking

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