Next generation of dementia scientists to explore genetic risk of Alzheimer's

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Biggest ever research commitment from Alzheimer's Society will create 53 new PhD studentships to research dementia

A gene which increases the risk of Alzheimer's disease by up to 10 times will be the subject of a new research hub at the University of Sussex funded by Alzheimer's Society.

The £700,000 partnership between the charity and the university will enable eight PhD students to unpick the role of the gene APOE4 in the risk of developing Alzheimer's, looking at how different forms of the gene affect the brain throughout life. The award comes as part of almost £5 million in new funding led by Alzheimer's Society to create the next generation of dementia researchers to develop new treatments and improve care for the condition.

The funding – the biggest ever charity investment in boosting the number of early career researchers in dementia – will create a network of Doctoral Training Centres at universities across the UK to enable the best scientists to tackle some of the most pressing issues in dementia.

The Doctoral Training Centres will be split between biomedical and care research, recruiting 53 PhD students from a variety of academic and clinical backgrounds to bring fresh perspective to dementia research. The new centres are part of the £100million Alzheimer's Society plans to spend on research into the condition over the next decade.

Dr Doug Brown, Director of Research and Development at Alzheimer's Society, said:

'There's a huge amount of progress being made by the dementia research community but unless we attract and train the best young talent we will limit how quickly we can make ground breaking discoveries. For too long dementia research has been underfunded and, as a result, we have significantly fewer scientists than other conditions with six times more people working in cancer than dementia.

If we're going to defeat dementia we need to give the best brains the right opportunities and build a research workforce that is fit for the future. That's why we're proud to be announcing the largest investment of its kind, which will see £5 million committed to create the next generation of dementia researchers. People with dementia deserve nothing less than an all-out fight back against the condition and our Doctoral Training Centres will help us enlist the right people to lead it.'

In addition to the Sussex Doctoral Training Centre:

- Scientists at four Scottish Universities (Edinburgh, Aberdeen, St Andrews, Dundee) will look at how heart health and high fat diets impact on the risk of dementia
- PhD students at the Universities of Nottingham and Worcester will explore the benefit of creative art activities for people with dementia and their carers
- Bradford based researchers will study how to improve the transitions experienced by people with dementia between different care settings to improve quality of life
- At Newcastle University, researchers will collaborate on understanding the distressing non-cognitive symptoms of Dementia with Lewy Bodies
- Southampton researchers will explore how to enable people with dementia to take calculated risks in daily life, such as travelling on their own, in order to maximise control and independence while balancing safety concerns.
- PhD students at University of Exeter will study dysfunctional brain networks in dementia using a range of approaches from mathematical modelling to brain scans to experiments with brain cells in a dish.

In the UK alone 850,000 people are living with dementia. The condition is progressive and ultimately terminal and there is no cure. Whilst government funding for research into dementia has increased, the UK spends seven times less on dementia research than cancer research. There are currently 3,600 researchers working in dementia in the UK compared to 23,000 working in cancer, a ratio of six to one in favour of cancer research.

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Doctoral student Nicola Voyle, whose PhD at King's College London is funded by Alzheimer's Society, is looking into finding a way to spot dementia early. She said:

'The funding I receive from Alzheimer's Society is vital to my research. I am searching for a marker of Alzheimer's disease in the blood which could lead to earlier diagnosis of patients and be used to create more efficient clinical trials.

'Funding from Alzheimer's Society gives me the opportunity to make a difference to those with dementia.'

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