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Half of primary care physicians say docs not prepared for Alzheimer's demand

Though almost 90% of primary care physicians nationwide expect to see an increase in people living with dementia during the next five years, half of them say the medical profession is not prepared to meet that demand, according to a new survey and report from the national Alzheimer's Association.

The findings are particularly alarming for the state as the association estimates that there are more than 410,000 New Yorkers ages 65 and older living with Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. The number is expected to grow more than 12%, to 460,000, by 2025. The figures represent about 10% of the national totals.

Additionally, the association found that New York should increase its current number of geriatricians, 605, by 35% to meet its anticipated Alzheimer's population needs in 2050.

In New York and nationwide, the association determined that current and future shortages in specialist care are placing the burden of dementia diagnoses and care on primary care physicians. However, 2 in 5 of those physicians report that they are "never" or "only sometimes" comfortable making a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or other dementia. About one-third report that they are "never" or "only sometimes" comfortable answering patient questions about the diseases.
Primary care physicians recognize that they are on the front lines of the crisis, the association said, but they also have a lack of adequate preparation and training opportunities.

"There's a high expectation from patients, usually over the age of 65, that their primary care physicians know about Alzheimer's or how to diagnose it," said Jermaine Ross, director of translational medicine at biotechnology company Immuneering and a member of the board of directors of the Alzheimer's Association's New York City chapter.

In addition to addressing specialist shortages, more resources need to be allocated to helping primary care physicians obtain additional education on Alzheimer's.

"But it's not just education," Ross said. "It's quite clear that we also need to provide them with more time and resources. Some of that burden has to be shifted toward a supportive staff of social workers, nurses and pharmacists to build up a robust network to be able to handle this huge wave of individuals who will develop the disease in the next five to 30 years." —Jennifer Henderson