

BCHD enlists famed neurologists to develop 'first proactive approach to community brain health' through 'Healthy Minds Initiative'



The Healthy Minds Initiative

Alzheimer's has become the costliest disease in America... but 90% of the cases are preventable

It wasn't very long ago that Alzheimer's Disease didn't exist. Oh, it really existed, but it was simply considered old age. It was often shrugged off as "losing it," or in severe cases, as senility. By the 1970s, some scientists began to recognize that Alzheimer's, an often-lethal form of dementia, was becoming prevalent in the aging cycle, but preventive measures did not yet exist. Then when Pres. Ronald Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1994 – a mere six years after leaving office – the disease began to enter the public consciousness.

Alzheimer's is progressive brain deterioration, and as our population continues to live longer, millions and millions more people are suffering from this horrible disease. Every family in America will be affected. Ten percent of people age 65 and older already have the malady, and if left unchecked, that number will continue to double every decade. Is there a cure? Can Alzheimer's be prevented?

Beach Cities Health District (BCHD), one of the largest preventive health agencies in the U.S., has finalized a three-year partnership with award-winning neurologists Drs. Dean and Ayesha Sherzai. Their project, known as the "Healthy Minds Initiative," will study 1,700 Beach Cities residents 65 years and older and the effects active and passive lifestyle changes have on cognitive and psychological health. In other words, how factors such as a proper diet and lifestyle can prevent brain disease and promote long-term brain health.

"The brain is the most important, complex organ in the body. It's two percent of our body's weight, but consumes 25 percent of our energy. Despite this, America and the world are far, far behind the curve pertaining to brain health. In fact, we're on track

to have a global Alzheimer's epidemic within a couple of decades," says Dr. Dean Sherzai, who, with his wife Ayesha, are co-directors of the Alzheimer's Prevention Program at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

"...the mortality for Alzheimer's has increased by more than 80 percent."

In just the last 10 years, while death rates are slowing from heart disease, cancer and diabetes, the mortality rate for Alzheimer's has increased by more than 80 percent.

Alzheimer's is a chronic degenerative brain disease that starts with short-term memory loss but soon destroys all functions of the brain. Through their studies at Loma Linda, America's only official "Blue Zone" and one of five Blue Zone communities in the world with astoundingly high numbers

of centenarians per capita, the Sherzais researched why some residents in the small San Bernardino County city

lived longer, healthier lives. They also observed that Alzheimer's/dementia was significantly lower in this specific population.

Their findings about the connection between lifestyle, environment and brain health helped lead the couple to the Beach Cities, where for the past seven years residents, schools, city government, restaurants and businesses have been successfully integrating health and well-being principles learned from the Blue Zones into their everyday lives.

"We're convinced Alzheimer's is preventable in 90 percent of the population through lifestyle enhancements. It's real, tangible hope," says Dr. Sherzai. "This is the reason we are so excited to work with BCHD in the Beach Cities, which already incorporate Blue Zones concepts into daily living, on the first proactive approach to community brain health.

"We believe that brain healthy living starts at home and in the community. While cognitive decline happens to all of us as we age, having a proper focus on lifestyle and mindful living can positively affect the most important organ in the body well into our 70s, 80s and 90s."

The current stats about the Alzheimer's epidemic are chilling.

- Alzheimer's is the costliest disease in America – \$240 billion in direct costs; \$230 billion in indirect costs annually. Heart disease (\$100 - \$150 billion) and cancer (\$50 - \$60 billion) rank second and third.
- At current rates, Alzheimer's costs could soar to \$1 trillion by 2050.
- More than 47 million people worldwide and more than 5 million in the U.S. are living with Alzheimer's today. Some predictions are that 50% of 85-year-olds will soon suffer from the disease.

Says Dr. Sherzai: "If we don't do anything within the next 20 years, the sheer number of Alzheimer's patients will collapse our health care system."

A blend of nutrition (including a whole-food, plant-based, low-sugar diet), mental and physical exercise, stress management, education, remaining socially engaged and other factors can build, protect and help the brain thrive, according to Dr. Sherzai.

The Sherzai's and BCHD believe it's no coincidence that these protective factors mirror the key lifestyle behaviors of the world's longest living people, the same behaviors the Beach Cities, with guidance from the Blue Zones

Project, have been retooling themselves to better support and promote among residents for close to a decade.

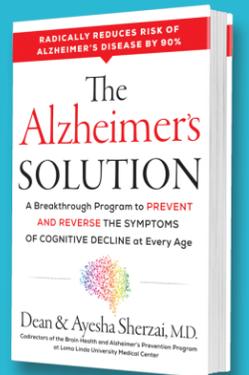
"Now we want to see if Beach Cities, where innovative wellness programs thrive, can make this kind of change," he says. "If that happens, imagine the impact. This Healthy Minds Initiative will be the most important health care program in the country. We are trying to show that by changing community, by changing environment, by changing lifestyle, you can significantly reduce the prevalence of dementia throughout the world.



"Whether it's nutrition, Beach Cities' restaurants serving healthy foods, local walking areas or community events that keep people's minds active, we want to see how this environment impacts the brain of an aging population. This will be the first study like this in the country."

In addition to the three-year Healthy Minds study, which is slated to begin in February 2018 and will include data analysis and oversight from Loma Linda University medical staff, the Sherzais and BCHD will be conducting community presentations and seminars on brain health throughout the Beach Cities. They will be recruiting senior residents to participate in the study and filing updates on their findings.

"The Alzheimer's Solution," a book by Drs. Dean and Ayesha Sherzai, was published in September. All profits from the book, which contains programs "to radically reduce risk of Alzheimer's by 90%," are being funneled into researching and promoting brain health in communities across the U.S.



Dean Sherzai's grandfather died from Alzheimer's. "He was a philosopher, poet, writer, politician – the brightest man I've ever known. His brain was optimally activated, but proper nutrition and diet were not part of his world." His grandmother, "an amazing matriarch," also died from Alzheimer's. Ayesha Sherzai's grandfather, who studied surgical medicine at Columbia University and public health at Johns Hopkins – and ultimately became prime minister of Afghanistan – died from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.