Young people want and need to know about dementia. Schools provide an ideal learning environment so an online unit has been developed for secondary education.

**Dementia awareness starts in school**

In this article...

- Why young people want to know more about dementia
- Development of an online learning unit on dementia for secondary school children

People with dementia and their carers face a lack of understanding from public services and society as a whole. Given that half of all people with dementia in the UK do not know they have the condition, they cannot get the help that they and their families need to support them with this progressive condition.

Those fortunate enough to receive a diagnosis suffer isolation and report that their friends cross the street to avoid them, and that they struggle to access local services.

Two misunderstandings fuel this global stigma:

- Dementia is an inevitable part of ageing;
- Nothing can be done to improve people’s lives once they have a diagnosis.

The West Midlands Regional Dementia Strategy (tinyurl.com/WM-region-dementia-strategy) takes the view that tackling stigma effectively starts in school (Department of Health, 2012). The reasons why are listed in Box 1.

The dementia teaching module

We designed an online dementia awareness teaching unit aimed at year 8 pupils, which included input from a senior nurse. The films, lesson plans and PowerPoint presentations are freely accessible on NHS Local (pictured), our award-winning digital platform, which can be found at tinyurl.com/dementia-in-schools.

In 60 minutes, 12-year-olds should:

- Understand dementia;
- Appreciate the difficulties of being a carer;
- Understand assistive technologies and their applications.

**Implementing the module**

Following his Challenge on Dementia launched in March 2012, David Cameron prioritised dementia-friendly communities as one of three national champion groups. Angela Rippon, the group co-chair, selected our online module to begin dementia education in English schools.

We enlisted the help of teachers and educationalists to develop modules, resources and tools for primary and secondary schools. Each module includes a theoretical component, followed by a practical intergenerational exchange, bringing together pupils and people with dementia. Projects include visits and exchanges, and incorporate art, music, drama and theatre.

For the next stage of the initiative, we engaged 21 schools (eight primary and 13 secondary/colleges) across the country to be our “pioneer group”. As each school implements its preferred modules in the 2012-13 academic year, they will share approaches, experiences and learning via a web-based network.

Finally, to harness local variation but ensure end-point uniformity, we designed an evaluation framework to measure the impact of this groundbreaking work, the results of which will be available next summer. NT

**Box 1 Why Dementia Education Should Start in Schools**

Young people want to know:
of 18-24-year-olds, 25% want to learn about dementia, compared with only 15% of those aged over 55 years (YouGov, 2012)

Increased exposure: as the population ages more young people come into contact with dementia through family, friends, neighbours or the media

Wrong exposure: as a result of learnt behaviour, young people develop a fear, avoidance or shame of the ‘D’ word

Optimum learning: the school curriculum already supports learning about relationships and loss, illness and wellbeing, caring and compassion

The right disorder: dementia is an exemplar template to model intergenerational exchange, compassion, respect and dignity, and to explore capacity for caring and resilience in the face of adversity, loss and stigma

Public health: it provides an opportunity to explore the interaction between a young person’s lifestyle – for example diet, exercise and alcohol – and the brain

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References