

Kit Bags and Berets: An Evaluation of An Activity Group for Military Veterans with Dementia and Their Carers

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Abstract

This research draws on the fields of health science and the sociology of health and illness to practically evaluate a local activity group that has been set up by the Alzheimer's Society for veterans with dementia and their carers in Portsmouth and Andover. It focuses on the social integration gained by group attendance and the benefits gained from both the group and the group's exclusivity. Inclusion criteria for attendance are based on those who have previously served in the Armed Forces and those who care for them. These shared characteristics were deemed fundamental when the group was set up, and this project evaluates the effect of this form of support network. This work is from the perspective of the veterans and their carers with both parties' views being given equal weighting. The research is qualitative in nature and uses semi-structured interviews and a combined critical discourse/traditional thematic analysis. The analysis is on-going and will be completed by mid-August 2014 for a final report due in September, a scheduled participant de-briefing and a planned academic paper submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

Introduction

Figure 1 shows how many people in the UK currently have dementia, but the Alzheimer's Society (2013) states that by 2021 this will increase to one million people. As there is presently no 'cure', as the costs of dementia to society are high (see Figure 2), we must commit to improving the lives of those who live with the illness, and their support networks. The Alzheimer's Society have funded this research and its significance lies in its practical application, including the improvement in wellbeing for veterans and their carers that could result from modifications based on research project recommendations.

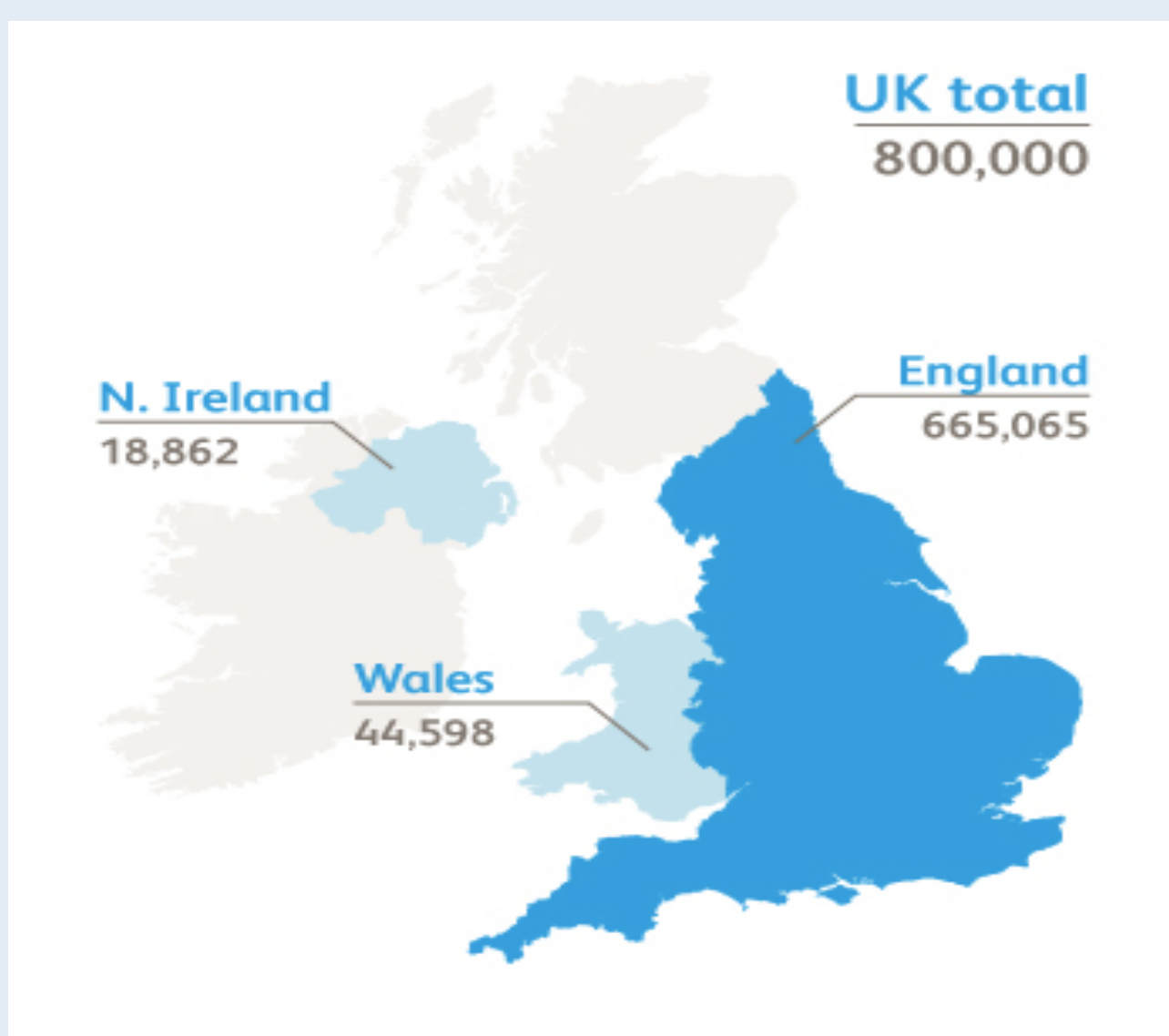


Figure 1: Current Dementia Population in UK (Alzheimer's Society, 2013)

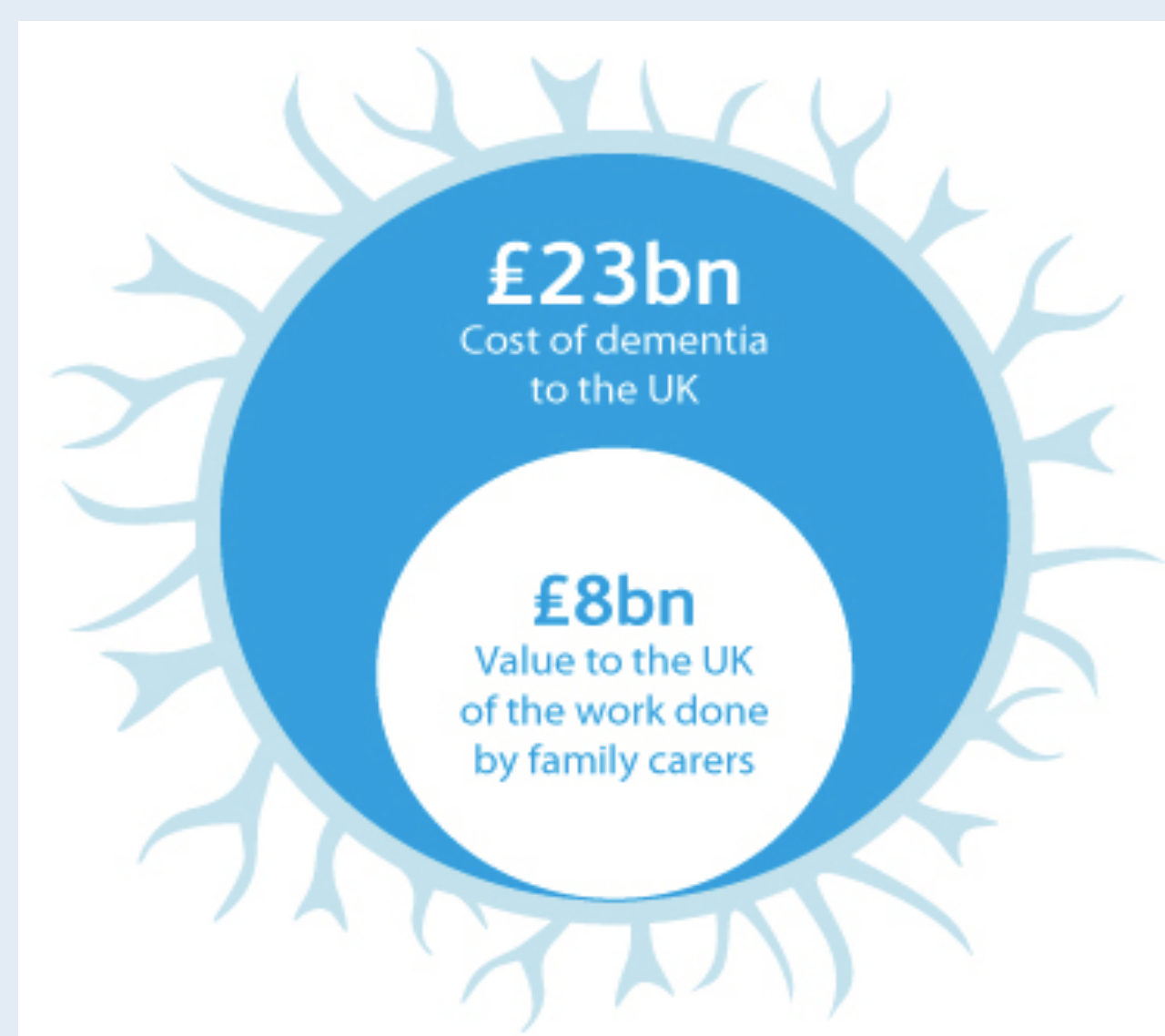


Figure 2: Cost of Dementia to UK (Alzheimer's Society, 2013)

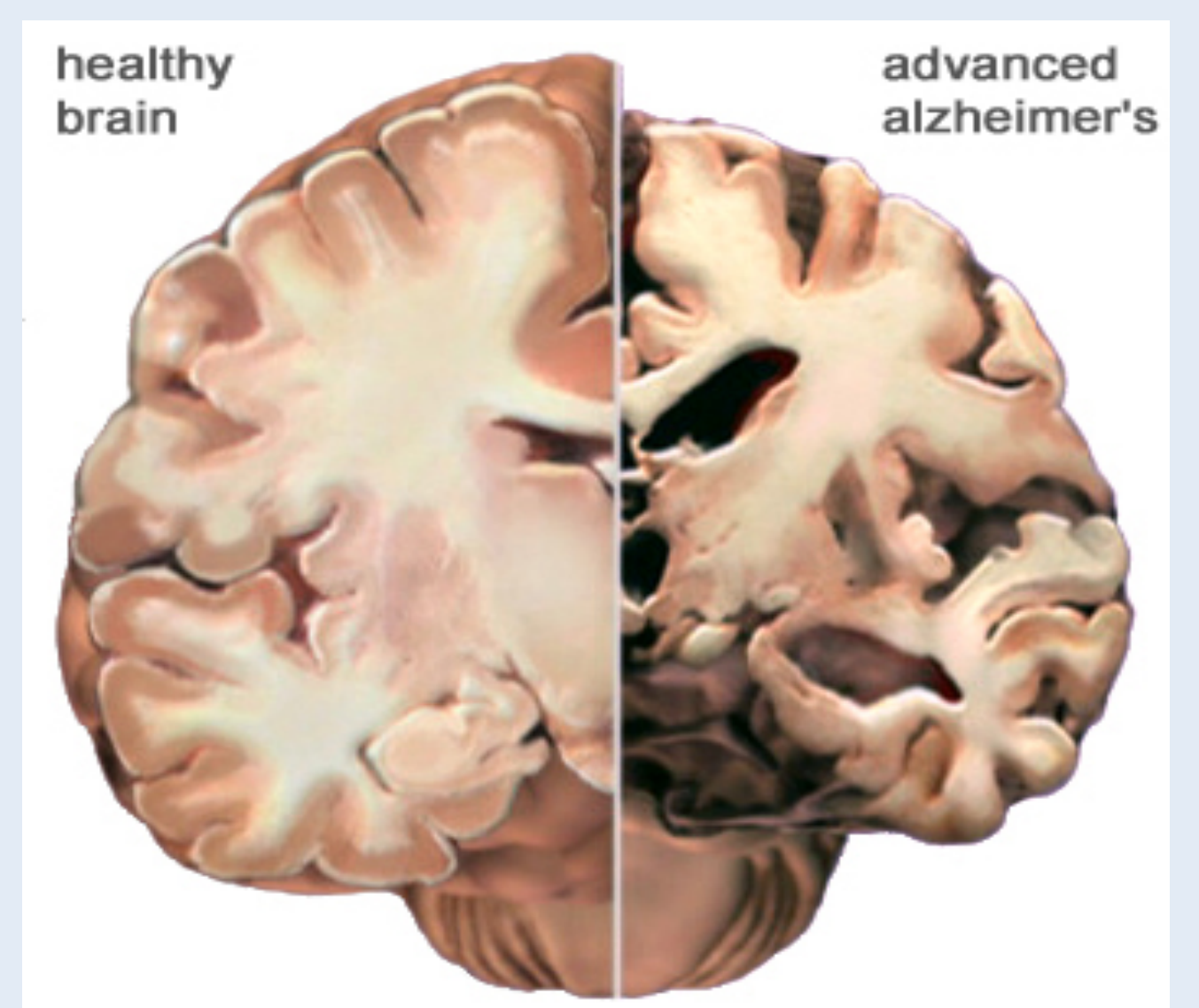


Figure 3: How Dementia Affects the Brain (Alzheimer's Association, 2011)

Summary of the Literature

The closest existing work to this study is Brodaty & Gresham's (1989:1378), which showed that carers who went through specialised training had 'reduced psychological morbidity', and were less likely to place individuals with dementia in care institutions. Brodaty, Gresham & Luscombe (1997:188) created a residential course for people with dementia and their carers, some aspects of which are being examined in this study as to their desirability. It includes structured activities such as 'stress management' and communication tasks. If you are interested in seeing a full copy of the schedule, ask Natalie who can provide you with a printout.

Methodology: Qualitative Research and Hidden Voices

This study has a strong commitment to portraying the 'hidden voices' of individuals with dementia and their carers. These voices can get lost in health science research which often makes use of large statistical analyses. Whilst mixed methods were considered for this study, the study has remained wholly qualitative in nature. Even qualitative research in this area often ignore the views of those with dementia themselves, justifying this due to their often reduced cognitive ability (see Figure 3 for the affect dementia has on the brain).

This commitment to highlighting the views of these often forgotten characters is being addressed through the following ways:

- ❖ Interviewing the individuals with dementia rather than just their carers or health professionals
- ❖ Equal weighting given to the voices of both the veterans and their carers
- ❖ A commitment to using direct (anonymised) quotations from participants in the final report
- ❖ Analysis is a combination of traditional thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis to focus on the discourse and context of the interview
- ❖ The creation of a lay version of results to be given to all participants at the end of the year
- ❖ A scheduled participant de-briefing at the end of the year
- ❖ Wide research dissemination using traditional media, social media and academic networks.

Results/Further Information

Final results are not yet available for this project as data collection is still on-going, but preliminary findings suggest wholehearted support for the activity group and its sole focus on veterans with dementia and their carers. Participants have so far been unanimously grateful for the activity group as a lifeline to both veterans and carers.

If you wish to find out further information about the activity group or this academic study then please get in contact:

[Details removed.]

References

- ❖ Alzheimer's Association. (2011). *Brain tour: More brain changes*. Retrieved from http://www.alz.org/braintour/healthy_vs_alzheimers.asp
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- ❖ Brodaty, H. & Gresham, M. (1989). Effect of a training programme to reduce stress in carers of patients with dementia. *British Medical Journal*, 299, 1375-1379.
- ❖ Brodaty, H., Gresham, M. & Luscombe, G. (1997). The Prince Henry Hospital dementia caregivers' training programme. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 12(2), 183-192.