Targeting healthcare students before they enter professional practice could be the key to increasing high-quality care and greater understanding for dementia patients, research has revealed during national Dementia Action Week (May 20-26) 2019.

With the current ageing population, dementia is becoming more prevalent in the UK, with one in 14 people over the age of 65 thought to have the condition. As numbers are expected to rise, so are the interactions with healthcare professionals, but research by Alzheimer’s Society discovered that practitioners were poorly prepared to care for patients living with dementia. A national strategy by the Department for Health is also underway to ensure better knowledge about dementia and remove the stigma that still surrounds it.

At Sunderland, pharmacy graduate Emma Boxer’s research suggests educating at undergraduate level for healthcare students by incorporating Dementia Friends’ information sessions as part of their training, would increase their knowledge of the condition and prepare them to interact with this patient group in practice.

Alzheimer’s Society’s Dementia Friends programme is the biggest ever initiative to change people’s perceptions of dementia. It aims to transform the way the nation thinks, acts and talks about the condition.

Emma’s research was prompted after becoming a Dementia Friends’ Champion herself and hosting a series of successful awareness presentations on campus to pharmacy, public health, adult nursing and mental health nursing students. Following the session she asked students to complete a quantitative survey to find out if their knowledge and understanding of dementia has improved and whether they felt it would benefit them and their patients moving into practice.

“The results were certainly enlightening and highlighted a significant increase in students’ knowledge surrounding dementia after the session,” explained Emma, 24. “The levels of satisfaction and enjoyment of the session showed high scores with many strongly agreeing that there was indeed a gap in this area. Significantly 91.5 per cent of students agreed that the session should be offered more to undergraduates amongst healthcare courses.”

She added: “We concluded that Dementia Friends’ training has a place and improves knowledge across a range of healthcare courses. The results demonstrate that education could be used to improve dementia-friendly healthcare professionals. This also shows the importance and success of the Dementia Friends’ session, as in only a short time period there was such a significant change in student knowledge.”

Emma, from Washington, who graduated in July 2018, is an academic pre-registration pharmacist, spending her week split between a community pharmacy, Burdons in Whickham, Gateshead, and working as an academic tutor in the University of Sunderland’s Sciences Complex. She became a Dementia Friends’ Champion after sitting in on a dementia session in the final year of her course.

She said: “It was a real eye-opener, learning not just about the science, but the personal impact the condition has. It gave me an understanding of how I might interact with dementia patients who I’m prescribing medication for safely and understanding their own anxieties and fears, rather than dismissing them. I wanted to roll out what I’d learned to others.

“In my session I use the example of a game of bingo to demonstrate and dispel some of the common myths around dementia, especially how patients’ perceptions can change. How to find solutions and help them live a better life.

“Contrary to popular belief, dementia is about more than memory loss, patients may also have issues with their speech, perception and motivation. This means that healthcare practitioners must be confident and competent to adapt their methods and consultation skills to ensure the best outcome for this patient group.”

Ed Chivers, Regional Dementia Friends Officer for Alzheimer’s Society, said: “We can’t thank Emma enough for the way she has so enthusiastically embraced the Dementia Friends initiative.

“We rely heavily on people like her to spread the word about how dementia affects people, and the small changes we can all make to improve the
wellbeing of those living with the condition.

“There are now more than 2.8million Dementia Friends across the UK, and the figure is rising every day, ensuring more and more people with dementia feel included, valued and supported in their communities.”

Emma has submitted her research for publication and believes more research needs to take place to assess the impact delivering these sessions have on patients, in relation to their interactions with healthcare professionals.

Attached is a copy of the research: Investigating the utilisation of the dementia Friends’ information session to improve knowledge in undergraduate healthcare students.

About Dementia Friends

Alzheimer’s Society’s Dementia Friends programme is the biggest ever initiative to change people’s perceptions of dementia. It aims to transform the way the nation thinks, acts and talks about the condition.

Dementia Friends is about learning more about dementia and the small ways you can help, from telling friends about the Dementia Friends programme to visiting someone you know living with dementia

For more information go to: https://www.dementiafriends.org.uk/

About Dementia Action Week

Dementia Action Week takes place between the 20th and the 26th of May. The goal of Dementia Action Week is to encourage people to take action to improve the lives of those affected by dementia, working to create a dementia-friendly UK where those with dementia do not feel excluded.

There are 850,000 people in the UK who are affected by dementia, and it does not just affect the elderly. 40,000 people in the UK under the age of 65 suffer from early onset dementia. It is believed that by 2051 the number of people who have dementia in the UK will have risen to 2 million.

For more information click here