Quirky Online Videos Hope to Boost Ireland’s Brain Health and Tackle Fears About Memory Loss

Trinity Animation Project Aims to Tackle Stigma Attached to Dementia

DUBLIN, Tuesday, February 18th, 2014— 10 quirky animated videos addressing common concerns about memory loss and dementia have been developed by researchers in Trinity College Dublin in a bid to allay fears about memory loss, promote brain health and tackle the stigma associated with dementia.

Currently there are 41,740 Irish people living in Ireland with dementia in Ireland and by 2041 there will be over 140,000. Stigma associated with dementia prevents open discussion of the condition and encourages the false belief that nothing can be done for people with dementia and their families. The series of short films hopes to encourage people to be proactive and take responsibility for their own brain health.

The films address common fears about memory loss and dementia and also provide practical advice about how to improve your brain health. Topics covered in the films include: When should I be concerned about my memory? What can you do to keep your brain healthy? And What’s the difference between Alzheimer’s Disease and Dementia?

The FreeDem films project has been developed by the NEIL (Neuro-Enhancement for Independent Lives) Programme at Trinity’s Institute of Neuroscience with funding from GENIO. The videos are available to view for free online at freedemliving.com and are also available on DVD.

The initiative aims to increase public and professional awareness about the important issues of brain health and memory loss. A lack of understanding of how memory works means that people mistakenly accept memory loss as an inevitable consequence of normal ageing and fail to seek medical opinion, resulting in other diseases or disorders that can affect memory function (e.g. diabetes, hypertension) remaining undiagnosed.

Speaking about the project, Dr Sabina Brennan, Assistant Director of Trinity’s NEIL ProgrammePrinciple Investigator on the FreeDem project and Assistant Director of Trinity’s NEIL Programme, commented: “People with dementia are stigmatised and this stigma leads to discrimination, depression, social isolation, delayed health-seeking behaviour and other negative outcomes. Stigma prevents open discussion, and promotes the false belief that nothing can be done for people with dementia. The problems created by stigma are serious but the solution may be simple – stigma can be reduced through the provision of accurate information about the disease, through the clarification of misconceptions and through the communication of empathetic feeling towards individuals diagnosed with the disease.”

“We hope that this series of short films will encourage people to be proactive and take responsibility for their brain health, make important lifestyle changes that reduce risk
factors, learn strategies that support declining abilities and seek medical advice in order to facilitate early intervention and diagnosis. The two-minute films are surprisingly fun and entertaining to watch so we hope that people of all ages will share them online with family and friends.”

Hugh Kane, COO of Genio added: “This is a critical time for Ireland in addressing how we meet the needs of the increasing numbers of people with dementia and their carers. Genio is supporting a number of innovative dementia initiatives underway across the country and the FreeDem films represent an important step in not only increasing our understanding but also addressing our attitudes towards this condition.”

What Can You Do to Keep Your Brain Healthy?

Brain health is intricately tied to the health of our body. Physical exercise not only helps your heart, it can increase the size of your hippocampus, the part of the brain crucial to making memories. Physical exercise also generates a chemical called BDNF, which acts like fertiliser for the brain, encouraging the growth of neural connections and new brain cells. You also need to keep socially active, as well, especially as you get older, because there’s growing evidence to suggest that people who avoid getting lonely, reduce their risk of cognitive decline.

Top three ways to keep your brain stimulated are:

1. Challenge yourself. The satisfaction you get from doing things slightly beyond your comfort zone actually changes your brain chemistry, making you feel more positive.
2. Change yourself. Novelty helps your brain. So it’s good to experience new things, take on new situations and meet new people. Doing this will keep things fresh, with fewer dull moments.
3. Learn something new. This encourages the growth of new brain cells and stimulates the connections between them. Which has its own benefits, because

When Should I be Concerned About my Memory?

Just because you have a memory problem doesn’t mean you have a brain disease or even that it is permanent. Forgetting where you put your keys for the third time in a week or immediately forgetting the name of a person you’ve just been introduced to are normal memory lapses that you don’t need to worry about. However there are some forms of forgetfulness that do warrant a visit to your doctor.

- If you get disoriented about where you are, or what time of day it is
- If you get lost in a place you’ve been familiar with for years
- If you start repeating the same story every day, without realising it.

Deciding when these memory problems warrant a visit to your doctor can be tricky, but a good question you could ask is: Are the problems interfering with life at home or at work, or affecting your quality of life? Some memory problems are treatable and even reversible.
This is because they may be it may be the symptom of another underlying condition such as stress, excessive alcohol use, anxiety or depression or even some medication that you are taking.

Dementia in Ireland: The Facts

- There are currently 41,740 Irish people with dementia; by 2041 there will be over 140,000.
- The overall cost of dementia care in Ireland is just over €1.69 billion per annum; 48% of this is attributable to informal family care; 43% is accounted for by residential care; formal health and social care services contribute only 9% to the total cost.
- 60-70% of individuals (approximately 26,104 people) with dementia in Ireland currently live at home in the community.
- The average cost of care per person with dementia in Ireland is estimated at €40,500, consistent with per capita estimates from other countries.

Notes to Editor:

About NEIL

The Neuro Enhancement for Independent Lives (NEIL) Programme at Trinity College Dublin aims to develop, evaluate and deliver neuro enhancement to older people worldwide. Failing cognitive function prevents millions of older adults from living independently. Based at Trinity’s Institute of Neuroscience, NEIL’s goal is to enable independent living and improve quality of life by conducting research aimed at dementia prevention and cognitive enhancement, transforming this knowledge into empirically grounded interventions and using this information to educate and empower older adults to maintain their cognitive function for as long as possible. Current research project being undertaken by NEIL include the RelAte project which is investigating the health impact of socially engaged meals among older adults and the DeStress project which is studying the relationship between dementia caregiving, stress and cognitive function in spousal caregivers.

About Genio

Genio is an independent, non-profit organisation based in Ireland driven by a vision of a society that benefits by valuing all of its citizens. Genio brings together Government and philanthropy to help develop and scale cost-effective, citizen-centred services so that everyone has the chance to live full lives in their communities. See www.genio.ie for further information.

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