

Men think differently about dementia – is this leading us in the wrong direction? A survey of male and female attitudes.

The initial analysis of data collected in this survey across the UK has shown an interesting difference between the way men and women think about dementia. These differences are significant because most of the people affected by dementia are women, whether as patients, carers or care workers and most of the influential decision makers, whether in government or charities, are men. This includes government ministers, civil servants, senior doctors, and the chief executives and boards of the leading dementia specific charities.

The United Kingdom faces a health challenge of considerable proportions. By 2015 there will be 850,000 people with dementia in the UK (Alzheimer's Society, 2015). This has been recognised as a challenge as big as the fight against cancer, heart disease and HIV (Department of Health, 2013). As part of the Dementia Festival of ideas Dementia Services Development Centre at the University of Stirling has conducted a yearlong survey of attitudes to guide its future work.

With women accounting for 2 in 3 of those living with dementia, this initial analysis of the findings focuses on the difference between males and females in their views on dementia.

The survey so far shows that women are more likely to respond to the survey questions but when the responses of men are included, it demonstrates a marked difference between the attitudes of men and women.

Though both men and women indicate significant concerns about how dementia is handled in respect of diagnosis, treatment, care and support, women in general show a higher level of concern and there is a larger percentage of men who seem to have a positive outlook.

Men seem to view dementia as something that will respond to more community support, hospital care and drugs, and also are positive in believing that families can take a greater role.

Women seem to experience more dread. They report more negative direct experience of dementia, which culminates in them reporting more concern about the knowledge level of care staff, and the quality of health care, particularly in hospitals. The fact that the family caring role often falls to women may explain the findings that women are less convinced than men that families can cope and that services are helpful.

Conclusion. There are questions to be asked about the extent to which dementia policy in the UK is dominated by a “typically male” outlook that does not reflect the reality of caring. That trend runs counter to the “typically female” attitude of women, which is more based on front line care or real experience of the effects of dementia. The issue is not simply a question of gender equality, but whether cost effective, practical solutions may be missed because current policy is dominated by the personal outlook of the policy makers, which displays an unconscious or even politically motivated bias away from the more negative aspects of the reality of dementia care provision.

Key findings on gender differences from the Big Ask survey

The survey brought up some key differences in how men and woman feel about dementia.

- Though most people know it is caused by underlying illness, men are twice as likely as women to regard dementia as part of normal aging (Fig 1)
- When asked, men had more confidence than women that better knowledge in the community would help with dementia, but women had a stronger belief that improving knowledge of care staff is needed. (Fig 4)
- Men are more likely to believe that people with dementia can be made better. (Fig 2 and 5)
- More men believe that drugs are or will be the answer. (fig 3)
- Men seem to have greater confidence than women that treatment of patients with dementia in hospitals is based on research (Fig 6)
- Women are much more aware of the dangers of a hospital admission (Fig 7)
- Women more than men have a negative experience of being listen to by the health care system (Fig 8)
- More men than women believe that you and your own family should contribute to care (Fig 9)
- More women fear dementia than men, and more women than men say they'd rather die than be affected by it. (Fig 10)
- Woman fear dementia more than cancer (Fig 11)
- More women who answered were positive about the idea of voluntary euthanasia (Fig 12)

The Big Ask Survey

For 25 years the Dementia Services Development Centre has worked hard to improve the lives of people with dementia. The Big Ask is an important part of the first ever Dementia Festival of Ideas and what the respondents tell us will form part of our work on the future of dementia.

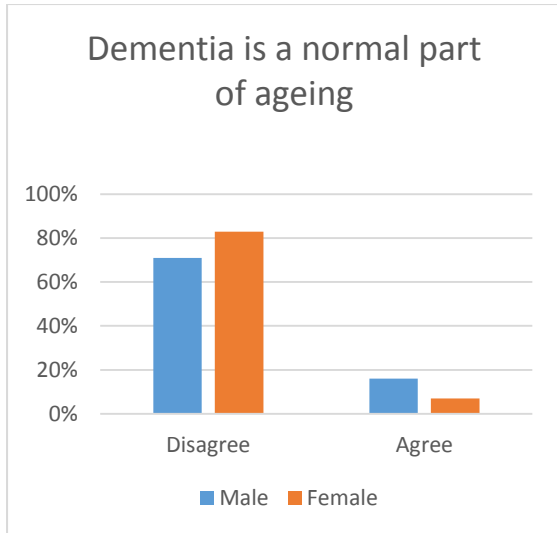


Fig 1: Dementia is a normal part of ageing

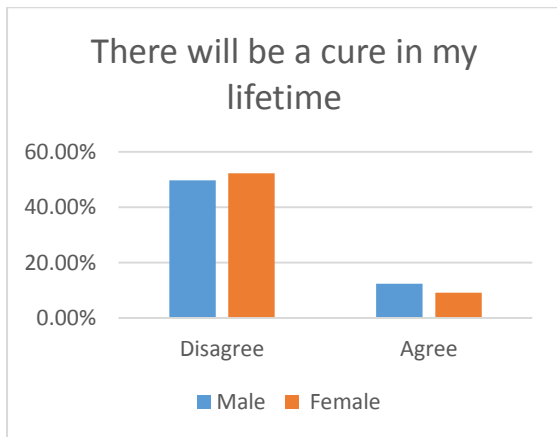


Fig 2: There will be a cure in my lifetime

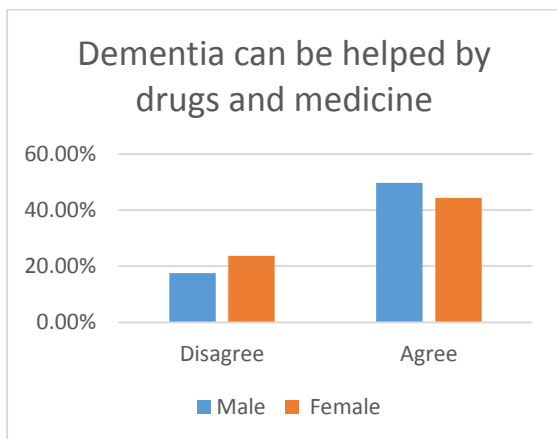


Fig 3: Dementia can be helped by drugs and medicine

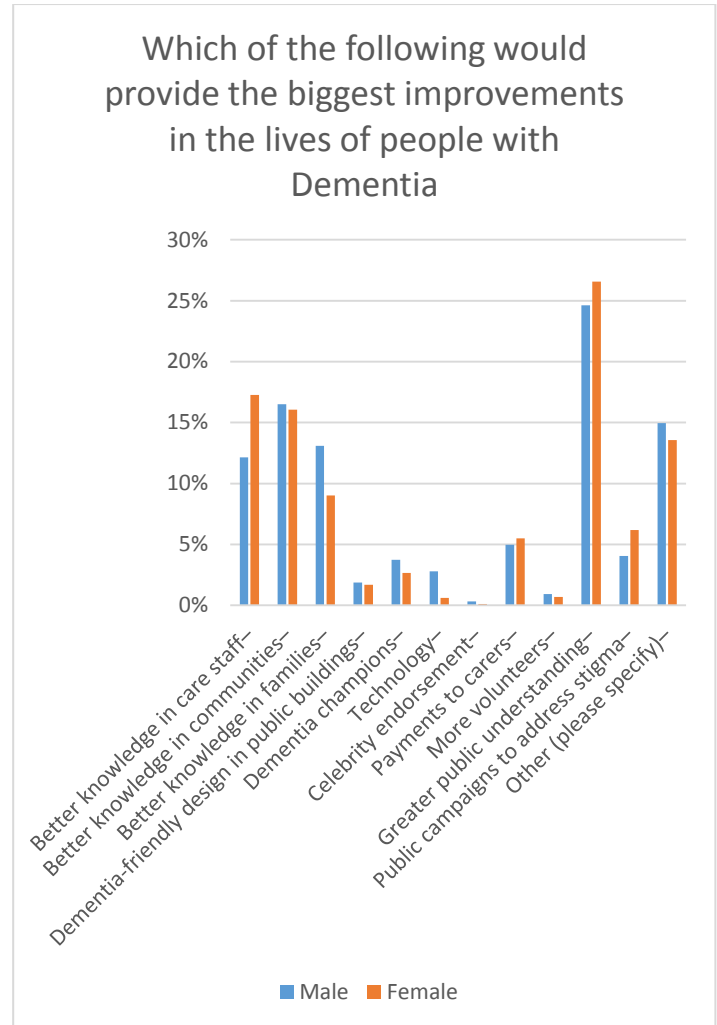


Fig 4: Which of the following would provide the biggest improvements in the lives of people with dementia

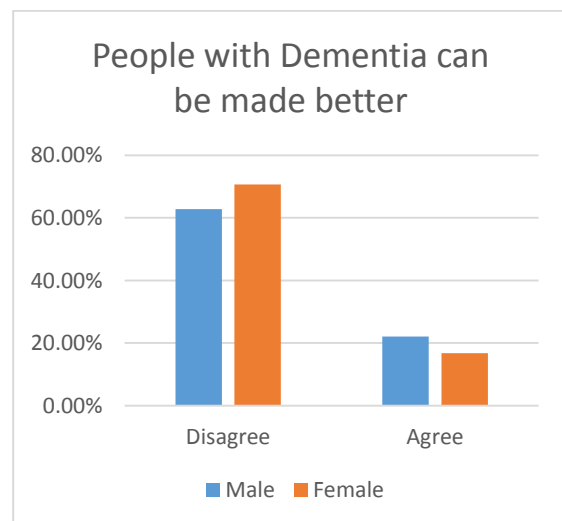


Fig 5: People with Dementia can be made better

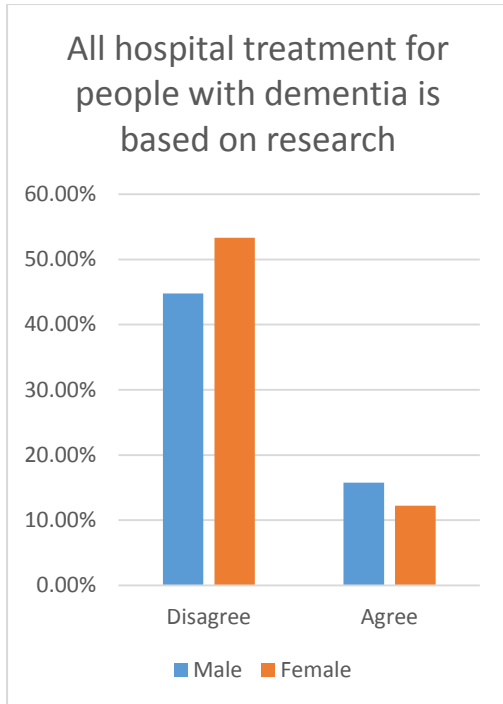


Fig 6: All hospital treatment for people with dementia is based on research

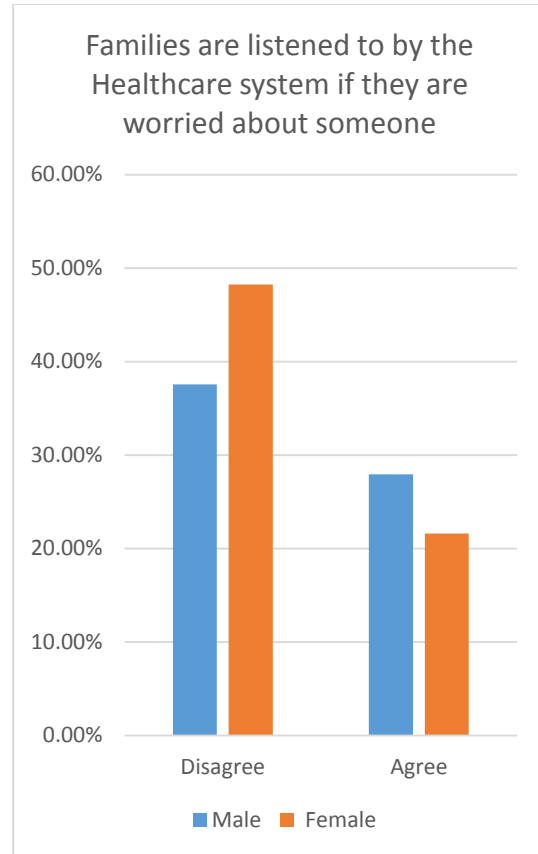


Fig 8: Families are listened to by the Healthcare system if they are worried about someone

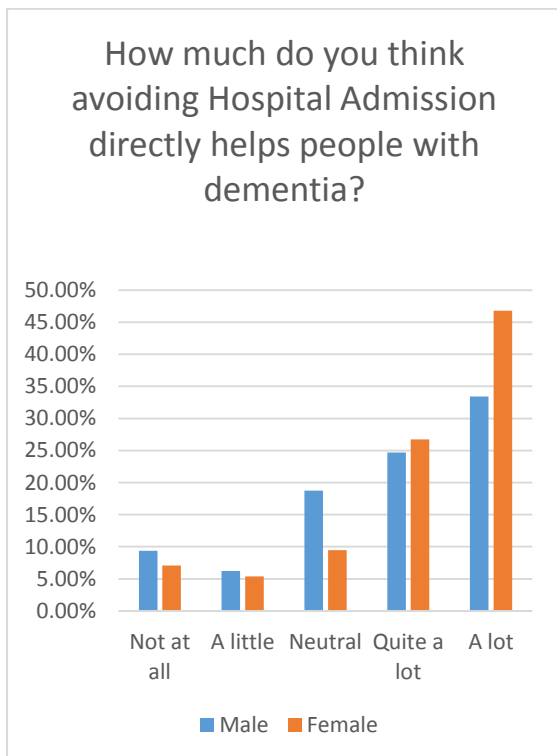


Fig 7: How much do you think avoiding Hospital Admission directly helps people with dementia?

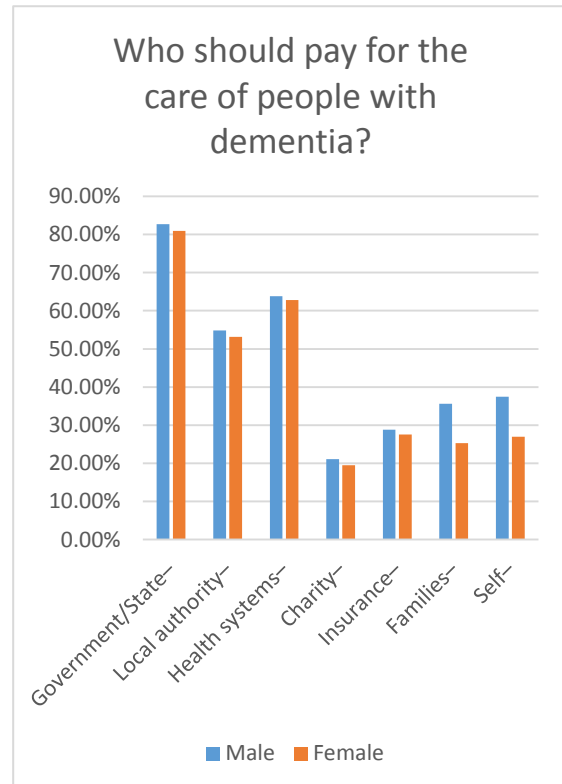


Fig 9: Who should pay for the care of people with dementia?

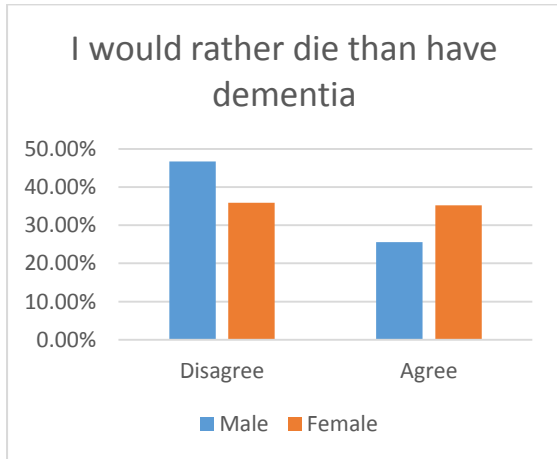


Fig 10: I would rather die than have dementia

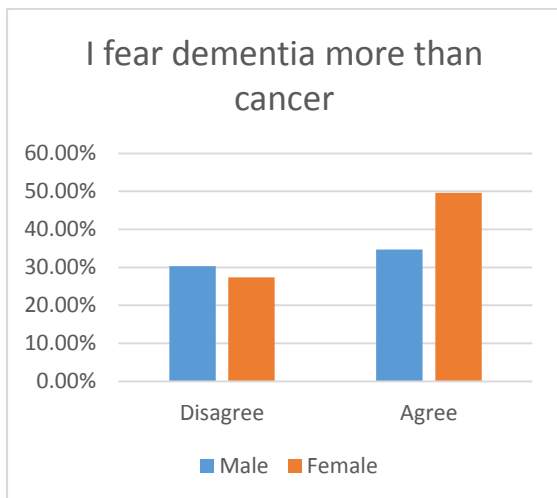


Fig 11: I fear dementia more than cancer

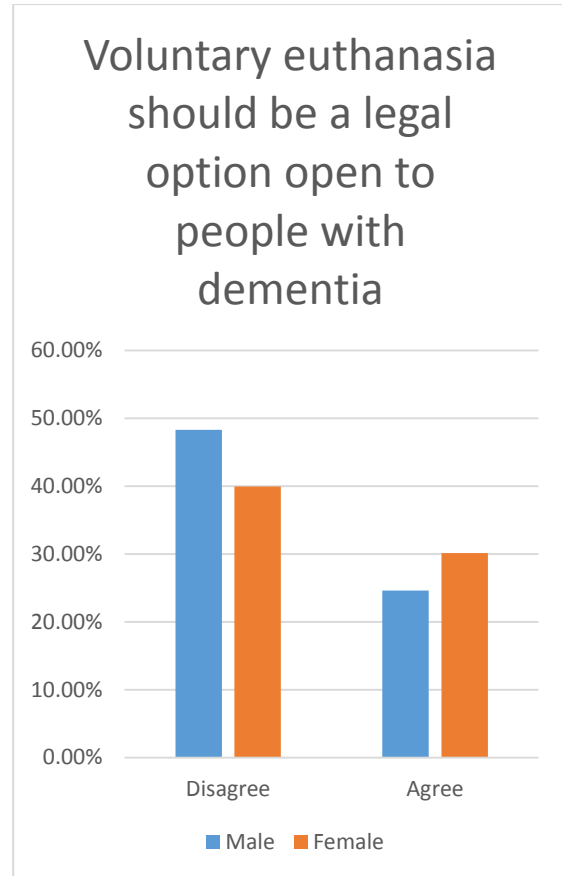


Fig 12: Voluntary euthanasia should be a legal option open to people with dementia