



Creating a dementia prevention toolkit in partnership with rural and regional communities



What is the focus of the research?

Researchers will embed themselves in rural and regional communities to create a dementia prevention strategy specific to people living outside of major Australian cities.



Why is it important?

Where you live can have a profound impact on your risk of dementia and access to vital health care. Unfortunately, people in rural and regional Australia experience dementia at 3-5 times the rate of people living in major cities.

Despite this, there is limited scientific understanding of how dementia risk factors cluster differently in these communities. This means that current prevention strategies and interventions may not be culturally or geographically appropriate for people living outside of cities.

Rural and regional Australia's ageing population has been described as the most significant demographic change of the last 30 years. As young people migrate to metropolitan areas, older people are left without family support and there are fewer opportunities for local social interaction, which is a major risk factor for dementia.

As populations dwindle, local health services and infrastructure close or become centralised to larger towns hundreds of kilometres away, leading to poorer health outcomes for older people. Therefore, there is a critical need for a public health strategy specific to reducing dementia risk in rural and regional Australia.

In this project, Dr Smith will collaborate with older Australians in these communities to address their higher prevalence of dementia, and co-design a rural-specific prevention toolkit. Her team will be embedded in South Australian

communities, so they can form genuine collaborations and co-create solutions that place rural people at the forefront of dementia prevention in their own communities.

In conjunction with local councils, Primary Health Networks and care providers, she will identify prevalent dementia risk factors; map existing support services and identify where improvements can be made; and assess each town's dementia friendliness. The evidence-based dementia prevention toolkit Dr Smith develops with these communities will be freely available to all rural councils and townships for immediate implementation.



Why regional South Australia?

The percentage of Australians aged 65 and over is set to increase from 14 per cent to 20 per cent by 2040. However, many parts of regional SA have already arrived at this figure. These communities have the double-whammy of increased dementia risk: they are ageing and have lower access to healthcare. It's imperative that researchers work with older adults in these communities to develop and implement rural-specific prevention strategies suitable for communities Australia-wide.



How will this happen?

Stage 1: recruit 200 participants from three rural SA regions. Researchers to perform dementia-related cognitive tests and assess multiple modifiable risk factors for dementia. Compare their scores against age-matched city dwellers. Gather information about participants' access to healthcare services.

Stage 2: embedded researchers, alongside collaborations with local councils, to collate data about existing services, social opportunities, green spaces and transport systems in Mount Gambier, Mid North and Eyre Peninsula. Analyse Census data and hold focus groups with community members, councils, service providers and community leaders.

Stage 3: hold six workshops over six months with older adults, allied health professionals, aged-care providers and local council members to discuss findings from stages one and two, and co-create the toolkit.



What will this mean for rural communities?

- A dementia prevention toolkit specific to their needs and risk factors.
- The potential for more local health services and support.
- Control of their own preventative health strategies.



Who's undertaking the research?

Dr Ashleigh Smith, University of South Australia

Dr Smith is a senior lecturer within allied health and human performance at the University of South Australia. Her research is focused on reducing dementia risk in older adults and is positioned at the nexus of neuroscience, exercise physiology and cognitive ageing. She has previously held early career fellowships from Alzheimer's Australia (2015-2016) and an NHMRC-

ARC Boosting Dementia Research Initiative fellowship (2016-2020). Dr Smith is lead investigator on the ACTIVate study, which is building best days and best diets for dementia prevention (2019-2026).

The title of Dr Smith's project is *Placing rural people at the forefront of dementia prevention strategies – The Re-ACTIVate study*.