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Briefing Series on the Role of Psychology in Health Care *Alzheimer's Disease*

- Alzheimer's disease is an irreversible, neurodegenerative disease that involves the progressive decline in cognitive function. It is the most common form of dementia and the sixth leading cause of mortality in the U.S.¹
- About 5.2 million Americans have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease,² and this number is projected to triple by 2050.³ This disease exacts an enormous toll on families and society, including increased disability and health care costs and lost productivity both for persons with the disease and for caregivers.
- Individuals with Alzheimer's disease require increasing levels of care and assistance as the disease progresses. Accurately identifying Alzheimer's disease as early as possible prevents excess costs and inappropriate treatment and enhances shared decision making.

| How Psychologists Can Help

- Psychologists have been at the forefront of efforts to advance cognitive assessment techniques and are able to evaluate the capacity of an individual to independently make medical, financial, and legal decisions.^{4, 5}
- Neuropsychological measures remain superior to other biomarkers (e.g., imaging and biochemical assays) in early identification of Alzheimer's disease.⁶
- Cognitive testing and neuropsychological evaluation by psychologists with specialized training and expertise are the most effective ways to differentiate dementia from normal age-related cognitive changes and those related to depression and/or other mental disorders.⁷
- Person-centered, psychotherapeutic interventions are a first-line strategy, preferable to medications, for managing behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia.^{8, 9} Behavioral and lifestyle interventions have been reported to delay cognitive decline and loss of function.¹⁰
- Psychologists effectively deliver these interventions and train family caregivers and direct care workers in responding to difficult behaviors associated with dementia.¹¹⁻¹³
- Research indicates that early identification and treatment of Alzheimer's disease is likely to result in significant, positive net social benefits and net savings for state and federal governments.¹⁴

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