

The importance of early treatment in MS

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Experts in Europe recently held a debate and discussion at the European Parliament with an audience of critical stakeholders about the importance of early diagnoses and access to treatment in MS.

The debate was driven by the MS Brain Health: Time Matters in MS initiative, which is led by an international team of MS doctors and researchers, including The University of Melbourne's Professor Helmut Butzkueven.

The team made the case for the personal benefits for people with MS and the economic benefits of early intervention. To make this case to the appropriate authorities they asked them to take into consideration the growing importance of 'real-world' data collected through large registries and databases, together with data from randomised controlled trials assessing the long-term impacts of MS therapies.

Arguably, Australia has just as good access to the available therapies for MS as any other country in the world, with 11 treatments currently available and listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) – thereby greatly reducing the costs of the therapies to those that need it. Further, Australian healthcare providers have greater freedom to select the most appropriate therapy for a given individual without a rigid framework for trying 'first-line' therapies before moving on to try some of the more highly active therapies.

In this respect, access to the full range of currently available treatments for MS is greater in Australia than in many other countries including the UK, New Zealand and many parts of Europe. While access in many other countries including parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East remains even more challenging.

This means that many Australians living with MS have a greater chance of timely access to the optimal treatment for them, protecting their brain health sooner. However, early diagnosis and early intervention still has its challenges despite diagnosis now being 10 times more rapid than it was in the 1980's.

The [Time Matters in MS](#) initiative, which MS Research Australia has endorsed, sets out some suggested solutions to these challenges. These include;

- Campaigns to raise awareness about MS amongst the general public and amongst GP clinicians are urgently needed
- Initiatives to improve access to specialist MS healthcare professionals and specialised diagnostic procedures are also needed
- Therapeutic strategies that offer the best chance of preserving brain and spinal cord tissue early in the disease course needs to be widely accepted and urgently adopted
- Advice on appropriate lifestyle interventions to maintain overall brain health

- Regular monitoring of disease activity and appropriate switching of medications where needed
- Major public policy changes to better translate recent advances in the diagnosis and treatment of MS in to improved outcomes

More information on the presentation from The MS Brain Health: Time Matters in MS team to the European Parliament can be found [here](#) with links to an important article on the burden of costs associated with MS (in Europe) which correlates well with similar studies done in Australia. The article also highlights the role the [International Progressive MS Alliance](#) is playing in helping to understand progression of MS, the most crucial factor in determining the greatest burden of direct and indirect costs associated with MS.

Gathering data on the self-reported impact and outcomes for people with MS has also long been a priority, via MS Australia's support for the long-running, survey-based research platform, the [Australian MS Longitudinal Study](#). The AMSLS has also underpinned several [Australian reports on the economic impact of MS](#) with an updated report due to be completed later in 2017.

All this work is critical to ongoing advocacy to ensure that everyone with MS around the world has the opportunity for timely access to the most appropriate therapies and most effective management of symptoms to reduce the impact of MS and improve quality of life.