

Research report calls for increased availability of early interventions for people living with dementia in Ireland

New research funded by the Irish Research Council and conducted by National College of Ireland in collaboration with The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, makes recommendations for increasing provision of Cognitive Stimulation Therapy for people living with dementia

Dublin, May 22nd, 2024: Researchers at the National College of Ireland have released new research findings today, which identify the key barriers to widespread provision of Cognitive Stimulation Therapy for people living with dementia in Ireland. Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) is an evidence-based intervention for people with mild-to-moderate dementia, which involves attending group sessions over a period of 7-14 weeks to work with a trained facilitator, engaging in different activities to trigger thinking and concentration. Studies show this intervention can improve cognitive function, communication, and memory and thinking abilities, with most improvements seen when the intervention is offered earlier in the disease-course. Interventions like CST are also very important for those with younger onset dementia who require services more tailored to their specific needs. In Ireland, over 400 people have been trained to provide CST, but the service is still not widely available for people diagnosed with dementia. In contrast, in the UK, CST is offered in memory clinics country-wide.

The ProBrain Research Lab at National College of Ireland, led by Dr Michelle Kelly and Dr Caoimhe Hannigan, today released findings from a study that aimed to understand barriers to the implementation of CST, and what factors might facilitate more widespread availability of CST. The research involved surveys and interviews with key stakeholders including people living with dementia and their families, healthcare professionals, and policy makers. The report, entitled 'Cognitive Stimulation Therapy for People Living with Dementia in Ireland', found that:

- There is a huge demand and need for early interventions like CST, and all stakeholders would like to see increased provision of these services for people living with dementia.
- Many people are not aware of CST, and there is a need for increased education and awareness about early interventions for dementia and their benefits.
- The key barriers to delivery of interventions like CST are practical – primarily related to a need for increased resources, particularly in relation to staffing within memory services. The new HSE Model of Care for Dementia (2023) is a positive development that may help to increase resource provision.

The report was launched today at an event in the National College of Ireland. The project was funded by the Irish Research Council and conducted in collaboration with The Alzheimer Society of Ireland.

The report makes a number of recommendations for increasing provision of this vital service for people living with dementia, including: provision of clear and accessible information for the public about Cognitive Stimulation Therapy, its benefits, and where it can be accessed; increasing resources and staffing available to support delivery of CST; ensuring training is

targeted towards those who are best placed to deliver CST; identifying an organisation or network to lead a coordinated, unified, approach to delivery of CST in Ireland; and engaging in further research to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing CST in an Irish context.

Dr Laura O'Philbin, Research and Policy Manager at The Alzheimer Society of Ireland, said:

"While the dementia landscape is filled with hope and promise of pharmacological approaches, it is vital that we concurrently focus on the implementation of evidence-based psychosocial interventions. This approach ensures that people living with dementia, now and in the future, can access a comprehensive suite of evidence-based supports and services. Cognitive Stimulation Therapy is a vital psychosocial support with well-documented benefits for people affected by dementia.

Our National Research tells us that Cognitive Stimulation and opportunities to spend time with others are strongly desired by people living with dementia. Many describe losing confidence as their symptoms progress and express a need to keep their minds active. The demand for psychosocial interventions like Cognitive Stimulation Therapy is evident, and we must work together to break down the barriers to provision and make these services widely available across Ireland."

Dr Michelle Kelly, project lead and co-director of the ProBrain Research Lab at NCI, added:

"We are so grateful to all of our participants for their contribution to the research, to the Irish Research Council for the funding, and to The Alzheimer Society of Ireland for their support. We have been advocating for increased availability of evidence-based early interventions for many years now, and while great developments have been made, there is much more to do. We know that psycho-social interventions like Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) can have a real and meaningful positive impact on the brain, and on everyday functioning, yet we struggle to provide these interventions as standard. This research has shown us that policy-makers and healthcare professionals are very supportive of CST and they also want these interventions made more widely available. For people living with dementia the message was clear, they want greater access to early, appropriate, and timely interventions. We are hopeful that this research, alongside positive developments like the HSE Model of Care for Dementia, will result in the demand for early interventions being met in the very near future."

For more information, please contact:

Teresa Murray
Head of Communications (National College of Ireland)
Email: Teresa.Murray@ncirl.ie
Phone: 01-4498652