

Health Politics with Dr. Mike Magee

Alzheimer's And Caregivers: The Hidden Tragedy TM

by Mike Magee, MD

(NAPSA)—The incidence of Alzheimer's disease, the brain disease that destroys and steals away our loved ones, right before our eyes, is on the steep rise. Nearly 5 million Americans have the disease now, and the numbers will double in the next 25 years, with an annual cost to our government of \$82 billion per year.

That's tragic, but it's only part of the story. Here's what you don't see: The majority of Alzheimer's



Mike Magee, MD

patients are cared for by loving family members, who often become clinically depressed, financially devastated or seriously ill as a result.

These family caregivers, struggling to hold it all together, have very little support. In one study, 43 percent were clinically depressed and nearly 20 percent were on medication for depression or anxiety.

The indirect cost, in lost worker time and productivity for family members of Alzheimer's patients, is expected to top \$60 billion this year. More than half of these family members spend an average of 46 hours per week caring for loved ones. It's not surprising that 48

percent of family caregivers of Alzheimer's patients decrease regular work hours and 18 percent resign their jobs completely.

What can be done? For starters, there's no safety net in this country for caregivers, and we need one.

Our public and private health care leaders should focus on five key areas of Alzheimer's care:

- Communication techniques
- Pain control
- Oversight of wandering behavior
- Counseling and positive support for caregivers
- Team-based approaches that extend into the home setting

Unpaid family caregivers of Alzheimer's patients spare our government the direct expense of institutionalization. But let's not fool ourselves: Family care giving can come with a painful cost.

Caregivers often put their jobs on hold and their lives on the line. The least we can do is lend them a hand.

Mike Magee, MD, is a Senior Fellow in the Humanities to the World Medical Association, director of the Pfizer Medical Humanities Initiative and host of the weekly Web cast "Health Politics with Dr. Mike Magee."

For more information on Alzheimer's disease, or to receive a free weekly health report from Dr. Magee, visit the Web site at www.HealthPolitics.com.