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DEBILITATING DISEASE TO AFFECT HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF BABY BOOMERS

Aging Population to Increase Number of People Who Develop Parkinson Disease

MIAMI— Almost eight million Baby Boomers will start turning 60 this year, making them more at risk for a life-threatening “mystery disease.” Currently, at least 1.5 million Americans have the mystifying Parkinson disease, an illness with no verified cause, no prevention and no cure in sight. Since most people start developing the disease in their 60s, the National Parkinson Foundation (NPF) estimates that hundreds of thousands of baby boomers are likely to be diagnosed over the next several years, resulting in a dramatic impact on their lives and those of their families and caregivers.

Dr. Michael S. Okun, NPF’s national medical director notes, “In addition to the physical strain, the disease also exacts a financial toll on the patient, their caregivers and society.” Parkinson disease is estimated to cost the nation an excess of \$6 billion annually, including treatment, social security payments and lost income from inability to work, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

“Another surprising fact about Parkinson disease is that most Americans are unfamiliar with the symptoms of the disease and thus live with it for years without knowing,” adds Okun.

Parkinson disease is a neurological disorder and is caused when certain nerve cells, or neurons, die or become impaired. Neurons produce the brain chemical dopamine, which is responsible for transmitting signals to produce muscle activity; the subsequent loss of dopamine causes individuals to be unable to control movements.

Early warning signs of Parkinson disease are usually subtle and occur gradually, including minor challenges such as fatigue, difficulty getting out of a chair or speaking softly. The person’s face may lack expression or they may appear stiff, unsteady or unusually slow. But as the disease progresses, it causes tremors, which can interfere with even the most basic daily activities such as holding a fork or tying a shoelace.

“Many people think what they are experiencing is just a part of the natural aging process and thus avoid seeking treatment and searching for a confirmed diagnosis,” said Jose Garcia-Pedrosa, chief operating officer of NPF. “Part of our challenge has been to raise awareness levels, so that people seek treatment and take advantage of the resources and support groups available, which make coping with the disease easier.”

For example, studies have shown that exercise can be beneficial for Parkinson patients. According to Okun, who is also a leading neurologist at the University of Florida’s Shands Hospital, while regular exercise will not stop the progression of the disease, it does have many benefits. One main improvement is with the patient’s overall body strength, which can lead to increased mobility, enhanced balance and a superior emotional well-being.

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There is currently a plethora of ongoing research projects in Parkinson disease, with the most promising developments involving drug discovery, particularly with neuroprotection. Additionally, there are many exciting projects regarding the surgical approaches to Parkinson disease, as well as stem cells, viral vectors and gene therapy. On the basic science front, many investigators are making significant inroads into understanding why the brain degenerates in Parkinson disease. One focus of these studies has been specifically on the misfolded proteins in the brain.

“Current research has led to some significant findings such as the Deep Brain Stimulation procedure, but more must be done if we are to drastically change the quality of life for Parkinson patients,” said Okun.

Founded in 1957 and headquartered in Miami, the National Parkinson Foundation’s dual mission is to find the cause of and cure for Parkinson disease, as well as to improve the quality of life for those afflicted with the debilitating disease. NPF has invested over \$100 million in research and is equally dedicated to providing care, education and support services for persons whose lives are affected by Parkinson. Currently, the centerpiece of NPF’s research, care and delivery system is its international network of 53 institutions worldwide that have achieved designation as NPF Centers of Excellence, Care Centers and Outreach Centers and through its 41 affiliated Chapters.

For more information on the disease and current research developments, or to learn about how you can become involved, visit www.parkinson.org.

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