

Dementia disaster warning

Zoe Smith

Australia is facing a dementia crisis, with the condition soon to be the nation's leading cause of death for men and women amid an underfunded health system, experts have warned.

Dementia Australia, the peak body for those living with the disease, has issued the stark warning ahead of the federal election, calling for a national conversation on the issue.

It comes as the chief executive of Actinogen Medical, the company behind a promising new treatment that slows down the course of Alzheimer's disease, called for the introduction of a national screening program to detect the condition, saying Australia faces a critical juncture in dementia treatment and care.

An estimated 433,300 Australians live with dementia, which is the leading cause of

death for women, while 29,000 people live with the younger onset variant of the condition.

Two-thirds of Australians with dementia live in the community and 1.7 million people are involved in their care.

"Dementia cannot be ignored during this election," Dementia Australia chief executive Tanya Buchanan said. "The situation is already critical with our hospitals, acute care and aged-care

systems all unable to meet demand.

"People living with dementia wait longer in hospitals to get access to residential aged care than someone who doesn't have dementia. The length of stay in hospital is five times longer than for someone without dementia."

Prof Buchanan said Dementia Australia was calling for a greater promotion of brain health at all ages as well as the

establishment of specialist care co-ordinators to deliver nationally consistent support to people living with dementia, their families and carers.

"Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and in the absence of a cure, we must ensure we take all steps possible to promote good brain health throughout our lives," she said.

Actinogen Medical boss Dr Steven Gourlay warned that if

an effective treatment was approved for dementia, GPs would face a surge in requests for treatment.

With next-generation treatments such as Xanamem demonstrating the ability to prevent or stabilise dementia before symptoms appear, he said a national screening program should be considered so that people can take measures to slow down the progress of the disease if at risk.