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Zachary Fisher/Alumni & Research

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PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS OF THE FIRST LADY
AT ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH PLANNING WORKSHOP

MRS. CLINTON: -- like me to participate in this very remarkable occasion.

I am moved, as I know all of you are, by the extraordinary commitment that both Mr. Fisher and Mr. Rockefeller are making today. And I know that you share my confidence that with Zachary Fisher committed to this effort, as he is, that it will bear results.

And what we have with this extraordinary collaboration is an example of what we need throughout our society. The ability of the government and private citizens working together to bring to the table the best scientific minds in our country to attack one of the most troubling diseases that afflicts us.

I would also like to express my greetings to the members of the military who are here, including the Secretary of the Air Force, because they represent the literally hundreds of thousands of families who Zachary Fisher has touched, along with his wife, over many, many years.

Mr. Fisher, you have served this country admirably, and you have done it in a way that has demonstrated sensitivity to the men and women in our nation's Armed Forces. And in a sense you are now leading an extension of that battle to once again reach out to men and women and their families.

When your accomplishments were briefly being lifted, as you were being introduced, Mr. Fisher turned to me, when the Fisher houses were mentioned, and said, "That was one of the best things I ever did, keeping families together, bringing families so that they could take part in helping to care for and heal their loved ones."

This battle against Alzheimer's is also about keeping families together. Because this disease, as all of

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you in this room know so well, and as Americans everywhere are learning, afflicts not only the person who suffers, but the entire extended family. And often reaches deep into the surrounding community.

We know that Alzheimer's today affects more than four million Americans, a number that is projected to grow dramatically in the next years unless we do act with the concerted effort that this commitment that Mr. Fisher has made, will enable us to do.

We know that it ravages more than 19 million family members who are caring for someone with Alzheimer's. To provide that round-the-clock care and supervision, which is often needed, another 67 million friends and neighbors pitch in.

Besides chilling the human spirit, Alzheimer's too often bankrupts hardworking, responsible families. Taking care of an Alzheimer's patient costs between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a year. That often means the difference between a family being able to stay in their house, a family being able to send a child to college.

It is the most expensive and least insured illness American families are likely to face. That is another one of the reasons why we here in Washington have tried to mobilize our forces to work hand in hand with the private community and the philanthropic and scientific community to take on this disease.

Federal funding for research into Alzheimer's has more than doubled, and it is now going to reach \$310 million in 1995. Today nearly half of the budget for the National Institute on Aging is dedicated to Alzheimer's research.

In addition to seeking a cure, the Clinton administration is determined to help find the causes of the disease, improve our ability to treat and diagnose it, and develop the tools we need to support family members and communities as they contend with this disease.

The investment has already begun to pay dividends. And I know that the scientists who have been meeting here have been discussing what breakthroughs have been occurring.

A year ago, scientists conducting basic research,

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funded by NIH, were able to identify a cholesterol-carrying protein that appears to be associated with Alzheimer's disease. The government intends to follow this up with an aggressive effort that will certainly be linked to the work that is being done at the Rockefeller University Center.

Last September the FDA approved Tacrin (phonetic), a promising drug, to treat the symptoms of Alzheimer's. And in an example of the efforts in this administration to expedite the information we receive about potentially helpful drug treatments, the approval for the use of Tacrin was granted just seven months after the drug's manufacturers submitted the necessary data to the FDA.

But we know, and the reason we are here, speaks very loudly to our knowledge that the Federal Government alone cannot wage the fight against Alzheimer's. It will take the kind of master plan that Mr. Fisher has referred to. It will take unleashing our brightest minds in bringing all that knowledge to bear.

We need to find ways to delay the onset as we search for a cure. The National Institute on Aging, as you have already heard, estimates that if we could just delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease by five years, the country could save \$40 billion in medical costs, wages, and lost productivity to say nothing of the extraordinary, immeasurable emotional cost that individuals and families bear.

There are many, many promising avenues that are now being explored. But we also need to put the fight against Alzheimer's into a larger context. Investing in research and finding better treatments and cures for diseases are integral to developing a philosophy of health care in this country that emphasizes prevention.

So, yes, we do have an economic imperative to work on Alzheimer's. But we also have a social and moral imperative. We need to change our view of this disease and other diseases and how we think about disease. And that is one of the reasons this president is so committed to comprehensive health care reform.

Yesterday the President met with congressional leaders to talk about the progress of reform. And what he heard was very encouraging. After a year and a half of very

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concentrated effort, the Congress is poised to move forward with legislation that will provide guaranteed private insurance for every American. By guaranteeing private insurance, benefits that cannot be taken away.

The President's approach will alleviate much of the emotional and particularly economic burden of families coping with serious chronic illnesses such as Alzheimer's. It will prohibit exclusions of coverage because of preexisting medical conditions. It will preclude lifetime limits on coverage. Those are two issues that are of particular importance to families struggling with Alzheimer's.

I have had the privilege to travel our country and literally talk with thousands of people. And what I hear over and over again, when I hear about Alzheimer's, is how the insurance policy that everyone in the family thought was absolutely the best that could be obtained, either excludes coverage for many of the services needed for Alzheimer's, or in the fine print has a lifetime limit that is quickly exhausted in the face of the expenses for caring for an Alzheimer patient.

The President's approach also offers a new program of home and community-based long-term care that will help those who are afflicted by diseases like Alzheimer's.

Some of you who have been in this field for a while, and I look around this room and I see people from the Alzheimer's Association where I was privileged to speak a few weeks ago, know what it is like for so many families, when confronted by the challenge of Alzheimer's, have no community resources available.

I have visited some model programs, the kind of models that we hope will become the norm under health care reform. I have held the hand of a woman whose husband is an Alzheimer's patient, who is able to bring her husband every day to an adult day care center, dressing him up and telling him he is going to work.

When he gets there he feels like he has some purpose in life, and has tasks that he can perform under the watchful supervision of the medical and social services staff.

I have talked with a husband whose wife has been

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afflicted with Alzheimer's, and because of the deterioration in her condition, the husband was unable to take care of her alone, and yet did not want the only alternative available to him, which in his economic circumstances would have meant spending himself into poverty to qualify for nursing home aid.

And luckily for him there came into being a model program that sent help into his home and helped subsidize that, so that he could continue to keep his wife with him.

Unfortunately, that wife and that husband, who want to care for their spouse, because as one woman told me, "He took care of me for 50 years; I want to take care of him," they are the exception.

They often are the ones who are lucky because they have the economic resources, or because they live in some of the few communities in our country that are trying to provide the sort of supportive systems of care that the families of Alzheimer's patients need.

Under the President's approach we will begin weaving together a system of long-time, long-term care that will be available not only for Alzheimer's but for other chronic conditions. Not only for older people, but for younger ones as well. Because we will finally recognize that we want to support families that wish to continue to care for their loved one, and we want to give them the tools and skills they need to be able to do so.

So we have a very big stake in what is happening here today. Everything from trying to make significant new investments in medical research at NIH or NIA all the way to making sure that individual families have the care, the options that they need to give the treatment and love their family members require.

When we think about health care reform, and as the debate gets increasingly pointed and focused in the Congress over the next month, I hope we will remember that it is not only about cost and economics, although it is about that; it is not only about social justice, although it is about that, when we look at the differences in care available to members of our society based on their ability to pay.

And it is not only about politics, although it is

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certainly about that. And politics, it is the most fundamental sense as to whether or not we as a nation can come to grips with some of the problems facing us, make the hard choices in front of us, and solve those problems using our political system.

It is also about the ethical dimensions of health care reform, about what kind of people we are and intend to be; what kind of investment we are willing to make in caring for each other.

With the vision and generosity of people like Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher, with the talents of men and women like the ones in this room, and the ones you will work with, we can make a very strong statement. And it is the statement that goes beyond just our commitment against Alzheimer's disease. It's a statement about what kind of values we have.

When we do score victories against Alzheimer's, as I am confident this effort will lead to, we won't only be celebrating with award ceremonies or speeches or ribbon-cuttings, we will be celebrating because of the good health, and the happier futures, the longer lives that we will be giving to people we love, and the kind of statement it will make about the kind of society and nation we want to have.

Thank you all very much.

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