



Social Connection Reduces Dementia Risk - and thousands of New Zealanders are already doing something about it

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Probus responds to WHO dementia prevention report, calling on older New Zealanders to act now

NEW ZEALAND - As the World Health Organization releases new guidelines identifying social isolation as one of the leading modifiable risk factors for dementia, one of New Zealand's largest social network for retirees and semi-retirees is calling the findings a wake-up call - and a clear call to action.

Probus in New Zealand, which brings thousands of members together across the country, says the WHO report reinforces what it has known for 50 years: staying socially connected isn't a nice-to-have in retirement. It's a health imperative.

"The science is clear and it keeps getting clearer," said Silvana Martignago, CEO of Probus South Pacific. "Social isolation is one of the most significant and preventable risks to our health as we age - and yet it remains one of the least talked about. The WHO's findings are a timely reminder that connection is not a luxury. It is medicine."

The WHO guidelines, released this week, identify nearly half of all dementia cases as potentially preventable through lifestyle changes - with social isolation and loneliness among the key modifiable risk factors alongside physical inactivity, hearing loss, and depression. The findings build on a growing body of research linking social disconnection to cognitive decline, with some studies comparing the health impact of chronic loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

National spokesperson for Probus in New Zealand, Margaret Drake, said the report underscores the quiet but vital work Probus clubs do every week across the country.

"People often think of Probus as a social club - and it is - but what these findings remind us is that regular social connection, having people to turn to, having somewhere to go each week, is one of the most powerful things an older Kiwi can do for their long-term health and their brain. I have spoken to so many members who have said that Probus has made such a difference to their lives, with their only wish is that they had joined sooner."

New Zealand's population is ageing rapidly. Stats NZ projects that by 2060, one in four New Zealanders will be aged 65 and over - up from one in six today - with the 65+ population reaching one million as early as 2028. At the same time, research by Age Concern Auckland

has found that 59% of older New Zealanders have experienced loneliness or social isolation, with nearly a third feeling lonely frequently or almost constantly. The downstream impacts on health and wellbeing - and on an already stretched system - are significant.

Probus clubs operate in communities across New Zealand, offering retirees and semi-retirees a low-barrier entry point to regular social connection. Clubs meet monthly, with regular outings, shared meals, guest speakers, and interest groups tailored to members' interests. Membership is open to anyone at or approaching retirement - there are no religious or political affiliations, no fundraising requirements, and no obligation beyond showing up.

"This is exactly the kind of community-led, locally rooted solution the health system needs more of," said Drake. "Every person who walks through the door of a Probus club is doing something proactive for their health. They just might not have thought of it that way before today."

New Zealanders looking to find a Probus club in their area are encouraged to visit probussouthpacific.org or call 0800 1477 6287.

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For media enquiries and interview bookings:

Primary Contact	Secondary Contact
Marcie Cheers	Yvette Adams
The Creative Collective	The Creative Collective
marcie@thecreativecollective.com.au	info@thecreativecollective.com.au
0415 385 816	0405 022 977

NOTES TO EDITORS

- Probus is a social organisation offering clubs for retirees, semi-retirees, and those planning retirement. Clubs operate throughout Australia and New Zealand.
- Probus is non-political, non-religious, and inclusive - open to all backgrounds and beliefs.
- Silvana Martignago, CEO of Probus South Pacific (based in Australia) is available for interview as is Margaret Drake, NZ Representative Director.
- [The WHO report referenced: *Risk reduction of cognitive decline and dementia*, updated guidelines, July 2026.](#)
- [One million people aged 65+ by 2028 | Stats NZ](#)

- [National population projections: 2022\(base\)–2073 | Stats NZ](#)
- [Loneliness Epidemic Among Older New Zealanders Calls for Ministerial Action | Impact PR / Age Concern Auckland](#)