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Export date: Fri Oct 30 7:34:55 2026 / +0000 GMT

Ottawa Journal ? spreading ALS awareness this June

Every year, millions of Canadians will visit their doctors with diseases and illnesses ranging from the common cold to the terminally sick. While many are easily treatable, some of the worst are those that still remain without a cure. One such disease is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) or Lou Gehrig's disease as it is often called.

ALS is a fatal neurodegenerative disease. ALS causes the degeneration of motor neurons; the nerve cells in the brainstem and spinal cord that control muscle contractions. As the disease progresses, victims experience muscle atrophy throughout their body due to their inability to voluntarily initiate muscle movement. The disease targets muscles all through the body, which can lead to extreme difficulty eating, swallowing, and even breathing. While the order and rate of symptoms varies from person to person, eventually most patients are unable to walk, get out of bed on their own, or use their hands and arms. However, as individuals living with ALS become increasing paralyzed, they do maintain their senses, as well as their intellect.

June is ALS Awareness Month. Groups and communities across Canada will develop public awareness projects and participate in a wide range of activities to raise awareness within their communities. For many citizens, this is a month close to their hearts, as the disease affects approximately 3,000 Canadians. The majority of these victims will eventually succumb to respiratory failure within three to five years of their diagnosis. To make matters even more pressing, the occurrence of the disease is increasing proportionally to Canada's aging demographic, as is true of other neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. In fact, according to the World Health Organization, neurodegenerative diseases are predicted to surpass cancer as the second leading cause of death in Canada by 2040.

Currently, ALS claims the lives of two to three Canadians each day, including the life of my father who succumbed to ALS a number of years ago. Since my personal encounter with the terrible disease, I introduced a Private Member's Bill to have June officially designated as National ALS Month. Given the mysteries surrounding the causes and cure of ALS, it is my hope that the Bill will serve to raise awareness and support for the many ongoing ALS research initiatives.

Due to the vast number of unknowns and a lack of effective treatment available, the importance of spreading awareness of this disease across Canada is crucial. I encourage all Canadians to take advantage of the wonderful weather June offers and participate in one of the many outdoor ALS fundraising events hosted by the ALS Society of Canada. Along with these organized events, you can also show your support by purchasing a cornflower, deemed ALS' flower of hope. For more information on these wonderful events, or ALS in general, please visit the ALS society of Canada's webpage at www.ALS.ca.

If we all do our part, by even just wearing a blue cornflower, we can increase research and funds to support those who suffer from this devastating disease.

By David Tilson, MP, Dufferin?Caledon