News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

We Can Diagnose MS Earlier Than Ever. So Why Are People Still Waiting?

Advancements in how multiple sclerosis (MS) is diagnosed mean people can now be diagnosed earlier than ever before. Yet many people globally are still waiting months or even years for a diagnosis and explanation of their symptoms, particularly in lower-resource settings where access to trained specialists, diagnostic tools, and national diagnostic guidelines remains limited.

The current diagnostic criteria for MS, known as the 'McDonald criteria', have been updated with the potential to speed up diagnosis and improve accuracy. In some cases, some people may now be diagnosed after a first episode of MS symptoms. But these advances are only effective if they are understood, supported and applied consistently in clinical practice.

This World MS Day, the global MS community is calling for urgent action to ensure the **updated McDonald criteria are understood, implemented, and applied in every country so people with MS can be diagnosed earlier.**

Knowledge Gaps Preventing Diagnosis

Previous versions of the McDonald criteria led to people being diagnosed earlier in the disease course, offering the potential for earlier treatment and support. Yet despite the availability of the updated diagnostic criteria, **lack of awareness and training among healthcare professionals means opportunities for earlier diagnosis are still being missed.**

Global inequalities remain stark. Only 18% of low-income and lower-middle-income countries report having national guidelines covering MS diagnosis, compared with 63% of high-income and upper-middle-income countries. Similarly, only 18% report national standards for MS care, compared with 49% of higher-income countries.

MS symptoms can be complex and varied, and there can be overlap with other conditions. Without timely access to trained specialists, diagnostic tools, and the updated McDonald criteria, people with MS may face delays, misdiagnosis, or missed opportunities for diagnosis at the earliest possible stage.

‘We now know more than ever about how to diagnose MS earlier and more accurately. But many people are still waiting too long for answers because healthcare systems have not kept up with these advances. Everyone affected by MS should be able to see healthcare professionals who can recognise the signs of MS early and use the latest diagnostic criteria correctly. Earlier diagnosis can help people start treatment and support sooner, giving them a better quality of life,’ **said Lydia Makaroff, Chief Executive of the MS International Federation (MSIF).**

Why This Matters

When MS is diagnosed early, people can begin disease-modifying treatments that can help delay progression and improve quality of life.

A timely diagnosis replaces uncertainty with clarity, giving people with MS answers and the chance to begin treatment sooner.

Earlier diagnosis and treatment can also help reduce avoidable disability and long-term pressure on healthcare systems.

MS Diagnosis Stories

Sujatha, India

Sujatha’s diagnosis journey lasted nearly a decade of unexplained symptoms, misdiagnosis and the wrong treatment. By the time Sujatha received an MS diagnosis her MS had progressed irreversibly like many other people with MS.

‘No one should have to spend years in uncertainty like I did. For nine long years, I lived with unexplained symptoms—numbness in my hands, extreme fatigue, vertigo, dizziness, and leg stiffness. I knew something was wrong, but time and again, doctors dismissed it as “just stress” or “anxiety.” … Due to the lack of awareness, even among healthcare professionals, I was misdiagnosed and untreated for almost a decade.’

Gabriella, Venezuela

The updated diagnostic criteria now include the optic nerve as a diagnostic region for MS, broadening the range of evidence that can be used by clinicians to make a diagnosis. Gabriella was diagnosed correctly with MS after a routine eye exam raised concerns.

'I was misdiagnosed with glaucoma. Although the symptoms subsided after three months, I continued to believe the misdiagnosis until mid-2025 when a routine eye exam raised concerns among other ophthalmologists. At that point, I was referred (for the first time in my life) to neurology. Receiving the [MS] diagnosis…filled me with relief. Knowing the correct diagnosis and having excellent specialists and an unparalleled support network continues to make things easier'

Updated Diagnostic Criteria

The diagnostic criteria for MS have evolved over time as the understanding of the disease has improved. First introduced in 2001, the McDonald criteria provide a framework for diagnosing MS based on clinical evidence and diagnostic tests such as MRI. The latest updates expand how diagnosis can be made, including:

- **Faster diagnosis:** Reduced need to wait for disease activity over time
- **Broader evidence:** Inclusion of the optic nerve as an additional diagnostic site
- **Earlier identification:** In some cases, MS may now be diagnosed before symptoms fully develop when MRI scans show evidence of damage in the central nervous system (CNS).
- **More tailored guidance:** Improved pathways for diagnosing children and older adults

These changes reflect major progress in understanding MS and can help shorten the often stressful and uncertain wait for diagnosis.

A Global Call to Action

MSIF and its global network of MS organisations are calling on governments and healthcare systems to:

- **Strengthen training and awareness** of the McDonald criteria
- **Ensure updated diagnostic criteria are integrated into clinical practice**
- **Improve access** to neurologists and diagnostic tools such as MRI
- **Align national guidelines** with the latest international standards

Visit www.worldmsday.org to learn more and get involved.
Media enquiries and interviews available: worldmsday@msif.org

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Notes to Editors:

Global MS Diagnosis Facts

- Every 5 minutes, someone, somewhere in the world is diagnosed with MS.
- An estimated 2.9 million people are living with MS around the world.
- There are at least twice as many women (69%) with MS as there are men (31%).
- MS affects children as well as adults, with at least 30,000 people under 18 living with MS.
- Barriers to early MS diagnosis exist in 83% of countries worldwide, with challenges including lack of awareness of MS symptoms, shortages of trained healthcare professionals, and limited access to diagnostic tests and equipment, particularly in lower-income countries.
- The biggest global barrier is a lack of awareness about MS symptoms—both among the public (68% of countries) and healthcare professionals (59%). While lack of awareness is a common issue everywhere, lower-income countries also face challenges like a shortage of trained healthcare professionals and limited access to affordable diagnostic tests and equipment.

Materials and events:

- Free online training to improve awareness about Multiple Sclerosis Symptoms and Diagnosis including the updated McDonald criteria here.
- New MS research project to better understand MS diagnosis globally shares real diagnosis experiences through digital posters here.
- The My MS Diagnosis campaign film can be viewed here
- More personal diagnosis stories of those living with MS are available, along with imagery here.
- See the global MS community in action on the World MS Day map here

Data sources:

- WHO's 'Intersectoral Global Action Plan for Epilepsy and Other Neurological Disorders' aims to improve access to treatment and care and the quality of life of people with neurological disorders including MS.
- The 'Brain Health – time matters' report highlights the importance of timely diagnosis in MS, NMOSD, and MOGAD, calling for greater MS awareness among healthcare professionals and better access to specialist neurology care.
- The MSIF 'Atlas of MS: Clinical management of multiple sclerosis around the world' Global data on barriers to MS diagnosis, treatment, care and rehabilitation.
- Neurology study analysing data from the Atlas of MS found major global inequalities in access to MS diagnosis, national diagnostic guidelines, and standards of care, particularly in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. Solomon AJ, et al. *Global barriers to the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis: Data from the Multiple Sclerosis International Federation Atlas of MS.* Neurology. 2023;101(6):e624–e635.
- The 'Atlas of MS: Mapping multiple sclerosis around the world key epidemiology findings show that an estimated 2.9 million people are living with MS around the world.

About multiple sclerosis (MS)

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is one of the most common diseases of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). Today, an estimated 2.9 million people around the world have MS.

MS is an inflammatory demyelinating condition. It is caused by damage to myelin – a fatty material that insulates nerves. In MS, the loss of myelin affects the way nerves conduct electrical impulses to and from the brain. Symptoms can include blurred vision, weak limbs, tingling sensations, unsteadiness, memory problems, and fatigue

The cause of MS is not yet known. There is no drug that can cure MS, but treatments are available that can help some forms of MS and there are many options to improve and manage the symptoms.

About World MS Day

World MS Day is an international awareness day on 30 May for everyone affected by multiple sclerosis. It brings the global MS community together to share stories, raise awareness and campaign with and for everyone affected by MS.

In 2009, MSIF and its members initiated the first World MS Day. Together we have reached thousands of people across the global MS community, focusing on a range of campaign

themes. MSIF provides a toolkit of free resources to help everyone take part in the campaign.

About the My MS Diagnosis campaign

The theme for World MS Day 2024-2026 is diagnosis. The name of the campaign is My MS Diagnosis and the tagline: navigating MS together.

The My MS Diagnosis campaign advocates for early and accurate diagnosis for everyone living with MS. It highlights the global barriers to diagnosing MS, raising awareness by sharing real stories and data. We are calling for better MS training for healthcare professionals, new research, and clinical advancements in MS diagnosis. Together we are building informed, caring communities and systems that support people diagnosed with MS.

About the MS International Federation (MSIF)

The MS International Federation (MSIF) is the world's only global network of MS organisations, people affected by MS, volunteers and staff from around the world. The MSIF movement is made up of 48 MS organisations with links to many others around the world.

MSIF and its members work together to boost scientific progress to prevent, treat and stop MS. We strive for a world where everyone living with MS can access early diagnosis, treatment and care. MSIF collaborates with organisations in countries where there is limited provision for people with MS, providing information, resources and support. Together we grow the global movement to place MS higher on the global health agenda, and to tackle the challenges for everyone affected by MS.

MSIF's mission is to bring the world together with urgency to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of everybody affected by MS. Together we're stronger than MS.