

How Does the Term “Dementia” Differ from Diseases like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s? A Follow-Up Commentary to Enhance Everyday Usage

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Issue: Confusion of the Dementia Syndrome with Actual Diseases

In a prior commentary in this journal, I discussed how the scientific term *dementia* is often misused as a general reference for any and all forms and stages of cognitive decline in the elderly [1]. The same article briefly noted in passing that the *dementia* term is also often confused by the public with actual diseases like Alzheimer’s disease or Parkinson’s disease, as reflected in lay questions like “Are Alzheimer’s disease and dementia the same thing or are they different?”, or statements that a person “died from dementia” as opposed to dying from Alzheimer’s or a stroke or some other actual disease.

In point of fact, dementia is not a disease but a particular clinical symptom state called a “syndrome”, and a person does not die of the dementia syndrome but rather instead from a disease (for example, Alzheimer’s disease) that may be the cause of the person’s dementia syndrome.

The purpose of this follow-up commentary is to explain how the *dementia* term represents a symptom syndrome and not an actual disease such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. The commentary will provide syndromic definitions of dementia, and account for related public misunderstandings and misuses of the *dementia* term versus actual disease states. The overall goal of the commentary

again is to enhance accurate public usage of the term dementia.

What is a Syndrome Versus a Disease?

A syndrome has been defined as “a set of medical signs and symptoms which are correlated with each other and often associated with a particular disease or disorder [2,3]”. Another definition is “a collection of signs and symptoms known to frequently appear together that suggest the presence of a disease or an increased chance of developing one [4]”. When syndromic signs and symptoms are linked to a specific and definite cause, the set of symptoms is then identified as a disease [3].

Dementia is a Syndrome

The term *dementia* is a syndrome and not a disease it represents a set of symptoms associated with each other and linked to a range of diseases causing cognitive and functional decline [5]. In particular, dementia is a syndrome associated “with many neurodegenerative diseases, characterized by a general decline in cognitive abilities that affects a person’s ability to perform everyday activities” [5]. Another source states that the dementia syndrome involves signs and symptoms of objectively observed cognitive decline from a prior baseline that cause significant impairment in everyday functioning, such as managing finances, driving, using medications, and maintaining personal hygiene [6].

Alzheimer’s is a Disease that Causes a Dementia Syndrome

Alzheimer’s disease is an illness in the human brain involving the accumulation of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles

and other changes which, over time, cause progressive cognitive decline that leads eventually to functional impairment in everyday activities. When the cognitive changes result in “significant” impairment of functional activities, we state that the Alzheimer’s disease has caused the person to develop a “dementia.” Other diseases besides Alzheimer’s can cause a dementia syndrome: some examples are Parkinson’s disease, frontal lobe disorders like Pick’s disease and primary progressive aphasia, large vessel stroke and other vascular diseases, and traumatic brain injury.

Usage Errors Confusing Dementia with Disease

As noted above, the term dementia is often mistakenly viewed to be a disease rather than a symptom syndrome. As a result, the term is misused in everyday conversation by lay people and sometimes even professionals. For example, stating that someone died of “dementia” is inaccurate, as dementia itself is simply a symptom cluster and not a pathology based disease that can cause death. Similarly, equating dementia with diseases like Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s is inaccurate and confusing. Accurate usage would state that Alzheimer’s is a progressive neurodegenerative disease of the human brain that often results in a person developing a dementia syndrome. The dementia is the particular symptomatic expression of an underlying disease (Alzheimer’s in this case) affecting the person’s cognition and everyday functioning.

Enhancing Accurate Usage of Dementia by the Public

Hopefully this commentary has clarified the syndromic meaning of dementia and distinguished it from diseases, in particular neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s, that often cause dementia as part of their course. Dementia remains an important scientific term in the field of aging, and its proper understanding and accurate usage by the public serves both science and the public interest.

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