

Are Spouses of People with Dementia at Risk of Cognitive and Functional Impairments? Evidence from the Health and Retirement Study.

MM Pertl (mpertl@tcd.ie), BA Lawlor, IH Robertson, C Walsh & S Brennan
All at the NEIL Programme, Institute of Neuroscience, Trinity College Dublin

Background

- Caring for a person with dementia is a chronic stressor.
- Chronic stress can negatively impact on psychological¹ and physical² wellbeing as well as cognitive functioning³.
- Caregivers may be at a greater risk of cognitive impairment and decline.
- Impaired cognitive function could compromise caregivers' ability to provide adequate care.
- **Aim:** To examine whether cognitive and functional impairments are predicted by having (i) a spouse with dementia and (ii) a spouse who requires care.

Methods

- **Database:** Wave 10 of the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) RAND dataset⁴
- **Participants:** Respondents in a couple household who did not have dementia (n = 7,965); categorised according to:
 1. Whether their spouse has dementia or not
 2. Whether their spouse requires care or not (help on activities of daily living [ADL])
- **Outcome measures:**
 - **Cognitive performance:** Total cognition = time orientation + semantic memory + working memory + immediate recall + delayed recall (based on the Telephone Interview for Cognitive Status)
 - **Functional impairment:** Help required on at least one Instrumental ADL
- **Covariates:**
 - **Demographics:** Gender, race, age, household income
 - **Risk factors for dementia:** (1) Diabetes mellitus, (2) present smoking, (3) history of depression, (4) low educational attainment, (5) physical inactivity, (6) hypertension and (7) obesity
 - Depression (CES-D8 short form)

Results

- Respondents with a spouse who requires care had poorer cognitive functioning; this relationship was significantly stronger for male respondents (Fig. 1).
- Caring for a spouse with dementia specifically did not predict cognitive or functional impairment; however, having a spouse with dementia
 - a) moderated the relationship between income and cognition (Fig. 2) and
 - b) predicted caregiver functional impairment (52% greater risk), though not when depression was controlled.

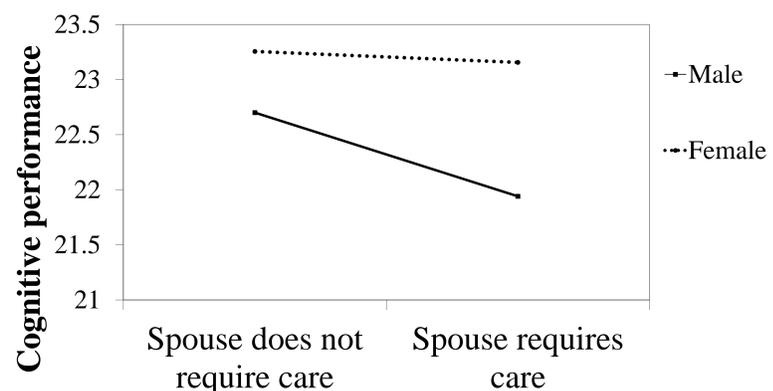


Fig. 1. Moderating effect of gender on the relationship between having a spouse who needs care and cognitive functioning.

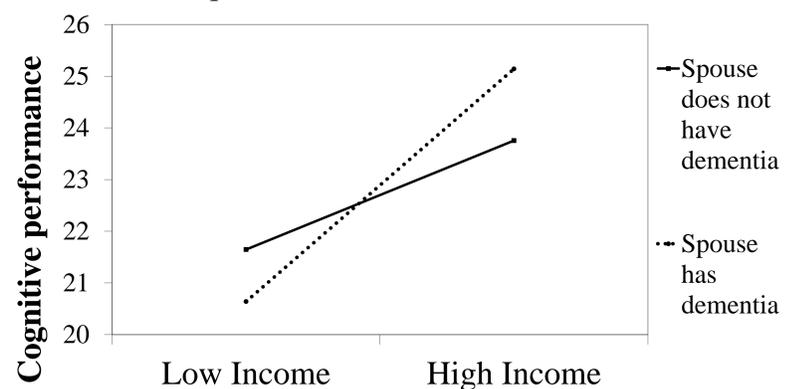


Fig. 2. Moderating effect of having a spouse with dementia on the relationship between household income and cognitive functioning.

Conclusions

- Caregivers, especially men, and low-income individuals who have a spouse with dementia may be more vulnerable to adverse cognitive outcomes than non-caregivers.
- Having a spouse with dementia may increase the risk of higher-order functional impairments and could compromise caregivers' ability to provide care.
- Targeting depression may help to delay functional impairments.

References

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NEIL Vision: To enable independent living and improve quality of life by: conducting **research** aimed at dementia prevention and cognitive enhancement; transforming this knowledge into empirically grounded **interventions**; using this knowledge to **educate and empower** older adults to maintain their cognitive function for as long as possible.

Tel: 353 1 896 8414 Email: neil@tcd.ie Web: www.tcd.ie/neuroscience/neil

Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience, Lloyd Institute, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland.