

Dementia Misdiagnosis in the Elderly

Statement of Problem

The importance of ruling out hearing loss and auditory processing disorders prior to diagnosis of dementia in older adults is generally underestimated. Many symptoms of hearing loss – especially those related to difficulty in understanding and communicating – are similar to symptoms found in Alzheimer’s disease. Commonly used dementia screening tools are administered verbally and assume normal hearing acuity and central auditory processing.

Facts

- The probability and incidence of both hearing loss and dementia increases with age.
- Hearing loss impacts 36% of individuals between 65 and 84 years of age, and 66% or more of those aged 85 and above.
- A study conducted in a number of nursing homes found that 53% to 63% of the residents suffered from serious hearing loss but the nursing staff were aware of fewer than half of these instances.
- When older people do not understand what is being said around them they often respond inappropriately. Many of these behaviors are confused with cognitive decline. [Better Hearing Institute]
- An association between hearing loss and dementia supports the hypothesis that hearing loss contributes to cognitive dysfunction in older adults. [Department of medicine, University of Washington, Seattle]
- 83% of institutionalized older adults diagnosed as having senile dementia were found to have a hearing loss exceeding 25 decibel. Upon retesting for dementia, using amplification, 33% were reclassified to a less severe category of dementia.
- Studies have also shown a significant drop in communication problems in Alzheimer’s patients whose hearing loss had been tested and treated with the use of hearing aids.
- Individuals with auditory processing disorders [with or without hearing loss] require additional time to decode verbal messages and may appear slow or confused.

Solutions (for Legislators)

Legislators, 1) create a Senate or House Task Force to examine the issue, hold public hearings and make recommendations on how to minimize misdiagnoses of dementia; 2) consider introducing a bill to require the Department of Community Health to develop and disseminate a public awareness campaign if recommendations developed by a task force are not implemented, and; 3) if the above solutions are not effective in addressing the issue, consider introducing a bill to mandate a hearing evaluation by a licensed hearing care provider prior to dementia diagnosis.

The above fact sheet is included in the booklet sent to legislators. The “Solution” above is what we would like to see legislators do regarding this issue. How can you advocate for this issue? Please read on.

Solutions (for Advocates)

Discuss with your legislators the importance of this issue and encourage them to take measures to accomplish the proposed solutions. Impress upon them the importance of quality of life for older citizens regardless of their age or residence.