

Mental health of the elderly in Brazil: the relevance of epidemiological research

In December 2011, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) published the life expectancy of the Brazilian population in 2010: 73.5 years. Although the figure increased by 11 years in the previous three decades, doubtless a positive trend, new challenges have emerged. Taking only mental health as the focus, the increase in cases of frailty, depression, and dementia (geriatrics and gerontology giants) certainly raises enormous challenges.

In Brazil, a meta-analysis estimated that 26% of the elderly present clinically significant symptoms of depression (*Int Psychogeriatr* 2010; 22:712-26). Meanwhile, an estimated 24 million individuals in the world suffer from dementia, the majority in low-income countries (*Lancet* 2005; 366:2112-7). It is expected that the growth in the number of cases of dementia over the coming decades will be greater in low and middle-income countries, including Brazil.

These data raise two issues that are not only economic and administrative, but also involve promoting research to back the adoption of measures to deal with this scenario. Brazilian studies on the prevalence and incidence of depression and dementia and associated factors in the elderly are still the result of initiatives by research groups that are located mainly in the Southeast and South regions of the country. The same applies to aspects of functionality and quality of life in this age group.

However, together with the effort to expand knowledge that is still limited to some regions of the country, it is necessary to broaden the scope of our epidemiological studies, emphasizing changes in the aging process. In the case of depression, for example, it is important to focus on the limits between depression and possibly adaptive depressive symptoms (*J Gerontol* 2003; 58:249-65). For the dementias, empirical studies are needed on the normal aging process and cognitive alterations in its various domains. It is also essential for research to concentrate on the determinants of healthy aging and the concept of cognitive reserve/brain reserve.

These questions have gained relevance on the research agenda for mental health in the elderly population in countries with high life expectancy. An example is the *Kungsholmen Project*, a cohort study of individuals over 74 years of age launched in Sweden in the late 1980s. The study's various topics included cognitive functioning in aging, mild cognitive impairment, preclinical phases of dementia, and risk factors for dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

However, just researchers' awareness on these themes in mental health of the elderly is not sufficient for move forward in this direction. These investigations require long, expensive population-based studies, which results will not be available in the short term. Thus, the role of funding agencies will be essential for the production of knowledge on the determinants of healthy aging in Brazil.

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