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Diagnosis of Dementia by General Practitioners: a Meta-Analysis

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Background: General practitioners (GPs) are frequently con-
fronted with patients suffering from dementia. It is not clear
whether GPs are capable of diagnosing dementia adequately.

Aim: To gain insight into the ability of GPs to diagnose
dementia.

Data sources: A MEDLINE and PSYCHLIT search for meta-
analysis of 28 studies on the diagnosis of dementia by general
practitioners (period 1980-1995).

Results: In 7 high quality studies the GP's clinical diagnosis
of dementia was compared with psychometric tests or geriatric
assessments. The median sensitivity of the GP's diagnosis was
76% (range 52% to 91%). The median specificity was 85%
(range 65% to 99%). In 14 other studies the GP's knowledge,
diagnostic routines and attitudes were investigated. GP's re-
production of knowledge of dementia was poor. Nevertheless,
they were able to correctly recognize dementia symptoms from
a list. GPs rarely used diagnostic criteria such as DSM-III-R.
There was a wide variety in the type and number of diagnostic
procedures used.

Conclusion: The ability of GPs to diagnose dementia is fairly
good. This is remarkable given their limited knowledge of
symptoms and criteria. Better use of the diagnostic possibil-
ities might further improve their diagnostic ability.