Diagnosis of Dementia by General Practitioners: a Meta-Analysis

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Background: General practitioners (GPs) are frequently confronted 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.


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 reproduction 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 possibilities might further improve their diagnostic ability.