Predicting memory decline as a risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease in older post-menopausal women: quod erat demonstrandum?

Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is the major form of age-related dementia worldwide, accounting for more than two-thirds of all dementia cases. The disease is characterized by a progressive loss of cognitive and intellectual functioning (Gilman, 1997). A number of risk factors for AD have been identified. The prevalence of AD increases with age, diabetes, depression, family history of Parkinson’s disease and following head injury or exposure to solvents (Jorm et al., 1991; van Duijn et al., 1991; Ott et al., 1995; Yoshitake et al., 1995; Devanand et al., 1996). Published research further suggests that low education levels are associated with increased prevalence of clinical AD (Gatz et al., 2001; Qiu et al., 2001; Ravaglia et al., 2002). Women also have a higher risk for developing the disease than men, with the risk being markedly increased following menopause (Sherwin, 2002; Sherwin 2003). Additionally, slightly more severe cognitive deficits have been reported in AD in women compared to men (Buckwalter et al., 1993, Henderson and Buckwalter, 1994). These epidemiological trends may be a consequence of reproductive hormonal changes. Specifically, menopause results in a marked diminution in gonadal estrogen production in women (see Sherwin, 2003, for a review). Estrogen plays a pivotal role in the maintenance and function of neuronal circuits in the brain and in resistance to neuronal damage (McEwen, 2001). The neuroprotective properties of estrogen are thought to be mediated at least in part by anti-amyloidogenic, anti-oxidative and anti-inflammatory mechanisms (reviewed in Barron et al., 2006a). However, limited and somewhat mixed data exist regarding the association between endogenous levels of estrogen and cognitive decline (Manly et al., 2000; Schupf et al., 2003). Based on some of our own findings, we here consider the factors that may be useful in predicting memory decline as a risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease in older post-menopausal women.

We have previously noted the relationship between reproductive hormones (estrogen, leutinizing hormone (LH) and follicle stimulating hormone (FSH)) and global cognitive status in a large cohort of over 500 postmenopausal women (Rodrigues et al., 2008). However, with respect to the symptomatology of early stage AD, specific deficits in episodic learning and memory are the most commonly occurring cognitive signs of the disease (Collie and Maruff, 2000; Remy et al., 2005). We have noted a lack of independent or combined association between endogenous estrogen status and episodic memory capacity in the same cohort of over 500 older postmenopausal women studied by Rodrigues et al. (2008). This finding was observed despite the fact that the relatively large dataset allowed for the application of powerful statistical techniques, specifically with respect to multiple linear regression. This outcome is consistent with our previous report (Rodrigues et al., 2008) that estrogen did not have a statistically significant impact on global cognitive status in the same cohort; instead, gonadotropins, LH and FSH showed significant associations with global cognition. Further, gonadotropins have been reported to exert a significant role in AD risk and pathogenesis (reviewed in Barron et al., 2006b). However, in contrast to our findings, other studies have reported that endogenous estrogen does exert a significant effect on cognition (Drake et al., 2000; Senanarong et al., 2002; Wolf and Kirschbaum, 2002; Yaffe et al., 2000), and that estrogen shows no associations with gonadotropin levels (Hoskin et al., 2004; Tsolaki et al., 2005). The discrepancies that exist in these studies merit further consideration, specifically with respect to issues concerning sample size, age of cohort, presence of other AD-associated risk factors (including the APOE e4 allele) and the type of cognitive capacity being evaluated.

A specific threshold for estrogen may exist in relation to its influence on cognition: it is possible that clinically measurable effects of estrogen on cognition may only occur at higher concentrations (for example, after exogenous estrogen administration), compared with levels that are naturally present in post-menopausal women. In this context, it is relevant that several studies using measures of episodic memory have found an improvement in cognitive performance after exogenous estrogen replacement therapy (Phillips and Sherwin, 1992; Kampen and Sherwin, 1994; Jacobs et al., 1998; Burkhardt et al., 2004). Indeed, considering the substantial number of investigations into the effects of estrogen administration on memory in post-menopausal women, it is perhaps surprising that relatively little evidence exists concerning the relationship between endogenous estrogen concentration and episodic...
memory. Exogenous treatments of estrogen in post-menopausal women may better match the naturally occurring biological levels found in pre-menopausal women, and may be more likely to have a significant impact on memory and learning. Further, given that the findings we note here were obtained in a relatively older cohort (aged 75–86 years; Rodrigues et al., 2008), it is possible that women’s endogenous estrogen levels in the earlier post-menopause years are more strongly associated with episodic memory functioning.

We further observed in this cohort (Rodrigues et al., 2008) that the possession of an APOE ε4 allele did not have a statistically significant impact on verbal episodic memory performance. This finding is again consistent with our previous investigation of global cognitive status in this cohort of older post-menopausal women (Rodrigues et al., 2008). This point notwithstanding, considerable empirical evidence exists regarding the APOE genotype and its role in modifying the risk of age-related cognitive decline. However, the presence of the ε4 allele is associated with less than 50% of the population of patients with AD (Evans et al., 1997). Furthermore, this allele may not be a significant risk factor in all ethnic groups (Evans et al., 2003). In this cohort of post-menopausal women, other modulating factors such as education, age and other relevant biomarkers may have attenuated the impact of APOE genotype. We believe that this issue also warrants further discussion and investigation.

Elderly people have an enhanced risk of depressive disorders and symptoms (Wells et al., 1989; Judd and Akiskal, 2000; Judd et al., 2000). Moreover, a number of studies have reported a potentially important link between age-related depression and memory decline (Kral, 1983; Alexopoulos et al., 1993; Devanand et al., 1996). In our cohort (Rodrigues et al., 2008), depression was found not to be a significant factor associated with episodic learning or memory performance. The existing literature suggests that symptoms of depression can have quite specific effects on elements of cognitive functioning. This consideration might be highly relevant in this context.

Our data were consistent with established findings linking increased age, reduced educational level and increased blood-borne beta amyloid to lower episodic memory capacity. Further, one element of memory capacity that was evaluated (delayed recognition performance) was significantly associated with statin use and with hypertension status in this cohort (Rodrigues et al., 2008). Statins are used as pharmaceutical agents to reduce plasma levels of cholesterol, by inhibiting the activity of the enzyme 3-hydroxy-3-methyl-glutaryl-coenzyme. Accumulating evidence suggests that the use of statins lowers the risk of dementia, most likely via amyloid-related mechanisms (Jick et al., 2000; Fassbender et al., 2001; Pedrini et al., 2005). Statins may also improve endothelial homeostasis by increasing the accessibility of nitric oxide (Vaughan, 2003), which may facilitate chemical messaging between cells.

Our findings indicated that hypertension was a risk factor for lower episodic memory capacity. A number of previous studies have linked high arterial blood pressure to increased risk of late-life dementia and cognitive decline (Knopman et al., 2001; van Dijk et al., 2004; Whitmer et al., 2005). Indeed, studies have reported that hypertension may increase the rate of cognitive decline both in patients with AD (Hanon et al., 2003) and in controls (Bellew et al., 2004). However, other studies have indicated no significant association between hypertension and age-related decline in cognitive performance (Farmer et al., 1987, 1990; Scherr et al., 1991; van Boxtel et al., 1998). With respect to our own findings pertaining to hypertension, high blood pressure may cause cerebrovascular disease (particularly ischemia), including relatively minor but chronic disturbances in cerebral perfusion, producing unfavorable effects on brain cell metabolism (Elias et al., 1993). These changes may increase the likelihood that individuals with incipient AD pathology will express symptoms of dementia, including cognitive decline. Hypertension may also accelerate the AD process directly (Skoog and Gustafson, 2003), insofar as similar biological mechanisms may be involved in the pathogenesis of both hypertension and AD.

In summary, we have noted here that, in our cohort (Rodrigues et al., 2008) age, beta amyloid concentration and hypertension were negatively associated with episodic memory function, whereas education and statin use had positive associations with episodic memory. A relationship between endogenous estrogen and memory functioning was not evident. In future, additional insight will be gained from extended longitudinal investigations of similar cohorts, employing a wider range of cognitive and functional assessments in enriched groups of individuals who are at increased risk of prodromal AD. Further, although a wealth of literature exists on the relationship between reproductive hormones and cognitive decline, AD risk and AD pathogenesis, the precise role of estrogen still remains unclear. This is reiterated in the controversy that exists concerning the putative benefits of hormone replacement therapy for improving cognitive capacity and as a therapeutic for AD (for recent review and meta analysis, see...
Hogervorst et al., 2009). It is clear that in future large clinical studies which control for a number of relevant factors (as adumbrated herein) are required to address some of the discrepancies in the extant literature (Manly et al., 2000; Schupf et al., 2003).

Conflict of interest

None.

References


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