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Dementia and suicide - the missing bond

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Background & Aim: Dementias are a group of chronic neurodegenerative disorders that are currently incurable and usually lead to cognitive impairment and profound change of the personality with progressive loss of autonomy. Suicide is particularly prevalent in the elderly, representing a major public health concern. Suicide in dementia is under-investigated and findings on suicide risk and behavior are inconclusive. This review focus on the association of dementia and suicide in the elderly, describing the risks factors and the repercussions of the disease in the caregivers.

Method: Literature review through PubMed, from 2010 to 2015, using the MeSH terms “suicide” and “dementia”.

Results: Studies have shown that the risk of suicide is particularly high at the moment of the diagnosis of dementia and that it diminishes with disease progression. The elderly often employ lethal methods without prior statement of intentions. The risk factors analyzed include Caucasian race, male gender, age over 85, male widowhood, previous psychiatric comorbidity (particularly depression and hospitalization), psychotropic medication and higher academic qualifications. The contribution of the different types of dementia in the prevalence of suicide is still controversial, though it is described an increased risk in those where inhibitory impulses are abolished. As a result of cognitive and behavioral changes, care of an elderly with dementia represents a significant burden. A few studies conducted in caregivers describe higher rates of depression, anxiety and hopelessness which may be associated with suicidal behaviors but solid epidemiologic data is lacking.

Conclusions: Suicide in older adults is a major public concern, as the suicide rates in this population are alarmingly high, with devastating effects on the communities and the caregivers. Indicated prevention should include early detection/treatment of depression and cognitive impairment in Primary Health Care, supporting the families of demented individuals.

