

Letter to the Editor

Why Centenarians' Depressive Symptoms Must Become a Priority for Nurses

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To the Editor:

The world population's rapid aging is a globally recognized phenomenon. The proportion of very old people is also growing fast, notably centenarians: in 2015, there were half a million individuals aged 100 years old or older. According to United Nations predictions, this number will increase to 3.4 million in 2050 and more than 25 million in 2100, representing a population of centenarians 50 times higher than in 2015.¹ However, the aging process is often accompanied by the emergence or worsening of pathologic conditions,² of which depression can be one.

Indeed, depression among aging populations is set to become a significant public health problem and should be identified as a condition that is not a normal part of the aging process.³ One European study has estimated the prevalence of depression among older adults at between 17.0% and 35.0%.⁴ Looking more specifically at centenarian populations, the prevalence of depression may be even higher: the only known systematic review on the topic suggested worldwide rates of up to 65.0%.⁵ The extent to which differences in prevalence are due to the methodological issues of assessing the very old is currently unclear. Similarly, whether centenarians are more strongly affected than *younger* old individuals remains unknown. In Sweden, for example, the prevalence of depression among near-centenarians and centenarians was almost twice as high (32.3%) as among octogenarians (16.8%).⁵ More systematic research is urgently needed, particularly in the current Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic that could lead to the onset or worsening of depression.

Despite its high prevalence, depression remains underdiagnosed and undertreated, partly because its signs and symptoms are sometimes erroneously interpreted as parts of the normal aging process.³ It has been estimated that front-line health care professionals fail to recognize approximately half of the cases of depression that they encounter.⁶

This psychopathology can lead to such devastating outcomes as malnutrition, falls, delirium, functional decline, a worsening of other chronic conditions, an increased risk of subsequent dementia and frailty, institutionalization, and early death.⁵⁻⁸ It also represents a substantial burden for family and professional caregivers.⁶

In view of the adverse complications surrounding depression, its early detection and treatment are crucial to maintaining older adults' quality of life, including centenarians.³ Detection and treatment could also reduce the additional burdens on family caregivers and go some way to helping balance the books of overstretched health care systems.

Nurses are of particular importance in the fight against depression in old age. Because they are in the front lines of primary care, providing care at home, in nursing homes, and in hospital environments, nurses play a critical role in the early identification of depressive symptomatology, mobilizing preventive strategies, and implementing appropriate interventions.³ By encouraging the development of proactive quality care for older adults, nurses can have a truly positive impact on the health and well-being of people at risk of depression.

Adequate training seems essential to enable nurses to detect depressive symptomatology early on.⁹ There is a need for evidence-based training programs integrating the different components of nursing roles and responsibilities. Front-line nurses must develop a deeper knowledge of depressive symptomatology and the clinical skills to identify its risk factors and thus prevent the onset of depression. They should be able to identify the signs and symptoms of depression, screen for them systematically using appropriate tools, track and coordinate interdisciplinary care plans, and ensure that there is high-quality monitoring of their patients' mental health. Nevertheless, training alone is insufficient. Real improvements in treatment and care for very old adults will require that knowledge is transferred to clinical practice.^{3,9}

One systematic review revealed that most of the studies on centenarians were primarily interested in physical, cognitive, and social health.⁵ Research targeting their psychological and mental health has been limited so far, representing a gap in scientific knowledge with a potentially substantial impact on clinical practice.^{5,10} The rapid increase in the number of centenarians has made it essential to understand how much depressive symptomatology affects this specific population group. First, however, it will be crucial to accurately describe depressive symptomatology among centenarians. This is a required step before implementing strategies for the effective prevention, detection, treatment, and monitoring of depression adapted to the real needs of this special population and its caregivers.

Given their extensive interactions with patients and their families, nurses should have a leading role in developing and transferring knowledge about depressive symptomatology among centenarians. More research is urgently needed to provide optimal person-centered care based on the best available evidence.

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