The pathology-dementia relationship: evidence of modification from human epidemiological studies

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Background

- Dementia is a clinical syndrome associated with many underlying pathologies. It is often defined in animal models as the presence of insoluble protein aggregates in association with behavioural impairments.
- In humans, as pathological burden increases so does the risk of clinical dementia during life. However, there is much variability around these risk estimates suggesting that other factors modify the relationship between pathological burden and clinical dementia.
- We present two recent epidemiological examples for late onset dementia: the effects of age and formal years of education.


Higher education (e.g. primary, secondary and tertiary education) confers a decreased risk of dementia during life, taking into account pathological burden. This effect is not entirely due to those with higher education having less neuropathology.

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• We present two recent epidemiological examples for late onset dementia: the effects of age and formal years of education.


The relationship between Alzheimer’s type pathology (neuritic plaques and tangles) and clinical dementia attenuates with increasing age, but this is not the case for atrophy (hippocampal or cortical). The association between the pathological features of Alzheimer’s disease and dementia is therefore stronger in younger old persons than in older old individuals.

Key points

- The relationship between pathological burden and dementia is not straightforward.
- Epidemiological and animal model approaches to investigate the underlying biology of dementia are complementary. Some animal models and experiments are integrating epidemiological findings but more integration could improve the relevance of animal models to humans.

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Supported by a Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship