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Short Communication

Age Related Confusion: A Reality Beginning for Many

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When does aging begin? Aging begins the moment a person is born. Babies develop and mature into an adult. At some point the aging process changes. A person begins a decline in function and is often considered as aging or growing old. The advancing decline in function naturally ends in death of the body. This functional decline process is referred to as senescence.

The question as to when a person becomes old can be answered in different ways. Chronologic age is based solely on time passing and is a person's aging in terms of years. Ironically chronologic age has limited significance in terms of health although the likelihood of developing a health problem increases as people age. Biological age refers to changes in the body that commonly occur as people age. Vision and hearing typically worsen as people age. Some people are biologically old at 40 while others are biologically young at 60 and older. Psychologic age of course is based on how people act and feel. For example, a 77-year-old who works, plans, looks forward to future events and participates in many activities is considered psychologically young. I know.

Body changes with age occur because of changes within individual cells and in whole body organs. As cells age, they function less well and eventually die as a normal part of body functioning. Cells may die because they do not divide normally or become damaged due to harmful substances in the environment such as radiation, sunlight and drug therapy. Interestingly, cells may also be damaged with the by-products they create during their normal activities---free radicals are given off when cells produce energy. Cell suicide, known as apoptosis, occurs because of pre-programmed genetics as old cells are replaced by new ones including the process of eliminating excess cells. Cells also die because they can divide only a limited number of times due to the action of a genetic structure called telomeres which are expended during the division. Disappointedly, unlike normal cells, cancer cells can divide forever because the telomeres are never lost during division.

The wellness and function of body organs depends on how well cells within the organ function…older cells function less well. Cells die and may not be replaced in several organs (testes, ovaries, liver and kidneys) in which cells greatly decrease significantly with age. As happens, most healthy older people do not lose many brain cells however. This is in contrast to individuals who have had strokes or have Alzheimer's disease or Parkinson's disease. The loss of brain cells with no new replacement, and the inability to stop the surge of developing tangled nerve passages in the brain causes these challenged individuals to develop fear regarding the prospect of becoming confused. This fear of confusion causes individuals to believe they will lose their identity and independence (ability to drive, travel freely, take care of daily functions, etc).

As individuals age, many changes occur in the brain. Older people are more susceptible than younger people to conditions that can disturb mental function. As might be expected, when brain mental function is disturbed in older people, they usually become confused and cannot process information correctly. What happens? It becomes difficult to follow a conversion, answer questions appropriately, pay

attention to and understand what is going on around them, keep track of information including the ability to remember. What disorders are characterized by confusion? Delirium and dementia. Although these two disorders are very different and have very different causes, they may occur together. This is common in aging older individuals.

Delirium has a sudden onset and typically can last over a period of hours or days and is caused by some other condition, such as infection, dehydration, use or withdrawal of certain drugs (some ten or eleven classes of drugs) with sedatives being very common. Chronic stress is also a possible cause. Delirium can become worse at night and greatly impacts attention ability and encourages brain overactivity. Alertness can be challenged and ranges from sluggishness to near normal while orientation to time and place can vary. Language usage can often be incoherent and inappropriate. Memory can vary.

Dementia, in contrast to delirium, develops slowly with an uncertain beginning point but its duration is permanent. It can initiate on its own by genetic inheritance or be caused by a brain disorder (neurological degeneration due to plaque formation blocking nerve synapse transmission, blunt head concussion or vascular blockage in the brain). The first obvious sign of dementia is a loss of memory. Initially it is short-term memory challenge but advances to long-term memory loss. Dementia becomes worse at night and all aspects of mental function slowly and steadily deteriorate. The orientation to time and place becomes impaired and use of language changes with difficulty finding the correct word. Of importance is that introduction of a new drug or polypharmacy in the treatment of dementia can also cause delirium for individuals with dementia. Various publications in the public domain suggest dementia can progress for up to 5 - 8 years before the inevitable loss of body functions causes death. My experience as a healthcare practitioner working with Alzheimer's patients has verified this.

The Alzheimer's Disease International organization, in concert with the World Health Organization (WHO), has indicated there are 55 million people worldwide with dementia today. Someone is developing dementia every 3 seconds with 139 million people worldwide possessing dementia by 2050.

Is age related confusion, delirium and dementia a reality? YES!

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