



We are at a pivotal time point where it is possible – and necessary – to foster evidence-based practice surrounding diagnostic tests for dementia:

- The National Dementia Strategy (2009) emphasises the importance of early diagnosis of dementia
- Tests based on identifying Alzheimer's disease pathology are being actively developed
- No decision rules for the use of biomarker-based tests have yet been evaluated
- EU rules on direct-to-patient advertising are being relaxed

This is happening in a context of general lack of understanding of the accuracy of existing and emerging diagnostic tests, making it impossible for commissioning and care pathways to be based on robust evidence.

Policy context

The aim of the National Dementia Strategy is to ensure that significant improvements are made to dementia services across three key areas: improved awareness, earlier diagnosis and intervention, and a higher quality of care. The evidence available points strongly to the value of early diagnosis and intervention to improve quality of life and to delay or prevent unnecessary admissions into care homes. All PCTs currently commission a number of services which might make the diagnosis of dementia. They include general practitioners, old age psychiatric community teams, geriatric medicine and neurology services. Current systems are almost without exception non-prescriptive and lack clarity about where and by whom diagnoses of dementia should be made.¹

The research

Using The Cochrane Collaboration's state of the art methodology, we are conducting twelve Diagnostic Test Accuracy (DTA) reviews covering the full range of important imaging and laboratory biomarkers, and simple clinical tests. In addition, treatment decisions for people suffering from dementia will be informed by fifteen systematic review updates of pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions currently in clinical use in the NHS.

Contribution

To build capacity and improve the quality of research outputs towards the evidence base, we were involved in the following important initiatives:

- ALOIS – A register of DTA studies in dementia (<http://www.medicine.ox.ac.uk/alois/>)

- STARDem – Standards for the Reporting of diagnostic accuracy studies in Dementia
- Two generic protocols to improve quality and consistency across reviews
- Methodology to perform meta-analysis on tests of diagnostic accuracy in dementia
- Dementia DTA training modules

We anticipate this research will inform policy and commissioning through a better understanding of the best strategies to improve diagnosis of dementia. It will empower clinicians to make clinical decisions regarding use of diagnostic tools in their practice(s), and to identify and effectively communicate the value and limits of diagnostic test to their patients.



Research partner

This project is a collaboration between the Public Health and Old Age themes of the CLAHRC CP and Cochrane Dementia and Cognitive Improvement Group (<http://dementia.cochrane.org/>) based in Oxford.

References

1. Living well with dementia: A National Dementia Strategy. Department of Health. February 2009.