

Abstract

Background: Depression has previously been shown to be prevalent in family caregivers, especially spouses, who primarily live with individuals with dementia and are less likely to consider long term institutionalisation of their loved one. The literature suggests that depression in family caregivers can be influenced by ethnicity. Well-designed studies that have focused on spouses have been rare and limited to Western countries. The scenario in Hong Kong has not been investigated to date.

Objectives: To investigate the prevalence of depression and the associated factors in spouses of Chinese elderly with dementia (EWD) followed up in local psychiatric outpatient clinics.

Methods: This was a cross-sectional study that recruited 130 consecutive community living Chinese EWD and their spouses scheduled for follow-up in psychogeriatric clinics of a regional hospital in East Kowloon. The demographic, medical, and psychosocial information of these couples, as well as dementia specific illness data that pertained to the EWD, were gathered via interview, available informants and medical records. Social network and perceived carer burden were measured by the Lubben Social Network Scale (LSNS) and the Zarit Burden Interview (ZBI), respectively. Diagnoses of depressive disorders were made with the Chinese-Bilingual Structured Clinical Interview for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition Axis I Disorder, Patient Research Version (CB-SCID-I/P). The independent factors associated with depression in spouses were first identified using bivariate analyses and subsequently subjected to multivariate analyses.

Results: The point prevalence of current depression was 26.9%, with major depressive disorder (16.9% of spouses of EWD recruited) identified as the most common subtype. Using bivariate

analyses, significant covariates were identified, including female sex, negative rating of current marital relationship (e.g., 'bad' or 'very bad'), greater dementia-specific functional disability, ZBI and all neuropsychiatric symptom subgroups (with the exception of euphoria). A higher level of the hyperactivity subgroup of neuropsychiatric symptoms (including agitation/aggression, irritability/lability, aberrant motor behaviour and disinhibition) and greater perceived carer burden measured by the ZBI were independently associated with current diagnoses of depression in the spouses of EWD.

Conclusion: Using structured interviews, depression was identified as common in the spouses of EWD who attend psychogeriatric clinics in Hong Kong. Furthermore, this adverse impact was not limited to the spouses identified as the primary caregivers. Clinical sensitivity to depression in this at risk population must be heightened. Identification of independent factors associated with depression can assist mental health care workers to be more alert to the presence of these 'hidden victims' so that the early detection of at-risk spouses and timely intervention can occur to minimise psychiatric morbidity.

Keywords: depression, Hong Kong Chinese, spouses, aged, dementia