Background

- Caring for a person with dementia is a chronic stressor.
- Chronic stress can negatively impact on psychological¹ and physical² wellbeing as well as cognitive functioning³.
- Caregivers may be at a greater risk of cognitive impairment and decline.
- Impaired cognitive function could compromise caregivers’ ability to provide adequate care.

Aim: To examine whether cognitive and functional impairments are predicted by having (i) a spouse with dementia and (ii) a spouse who requires care.

Methods

- Database: Wave 10 of the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) RAND dataset⁴
- Participants: Respondents in a couple household who did not have dementia (n = 7,965); categorised according to:
  1. Whether their spouse has dementia or not
  2. Whether their spouse requires care or not (help on activities of daily living [ADL])
- Outcome measures:
  - Cognitive performance: Total cognition = time orientation + semantic memory + working memory + immediate recall + delayed recall (based on the Telephone Interview for Cognitive Status)
  - Functional impairment: Help required on at least one Instrumental ADL
- Covariates:
  - Demographics: Gender, race, age, household income
  - Risk factors for dementia: (1) Diabetes mellitus, (2) present smoking, (3) history of depression, (4) low educational attainment, (5) physical inactivity, (6) hypertension and (7) obesity
  - Depression (CES-D8 short form)

Results

- Respondents with a spouse who requires care had poorer cognitive functioning; this relationship was significantly stronger for male respondents (Fig. 1).
- Caring for a spouse with dementia specifically did not predict cognitive or functional impairment; however, having a spouse with dementia
  a) moderated the relationship between income and cognition (Fig. 2) and
  b) predicted caregiver functional impairment (52% greater risk), though not when depression was controlled.

Conclusions

- Caregivers, especially men, and low-income individuals who have a spouse with dementia may be more vulnerable to adverse cognitive outcomes than non-caregivers.
- Having a spouse with dementia may increase the risk of higher-order functional impairments and could compromise caregivers’ ability to provide care.
- Targeting depression may help to delay functional impairments.

References

4. Health and Retirement Study (RAND HRS v.x) public use dataset. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan with funding from the National Institute on Aging (grant number NIA U01AG009740); 2010. The HRS is sponsored by the National Institute on Aging (grant number NIA U01AG009740) and is conducted by the University of Michigan.