



Suspecting dementia: canaries, chameleons and zebras

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ABSTRACT

The early and accurate diagnosis of dementia is more important than ever before but remains challenging. Dementia is increasingly the business of neurologists and, with ageing populations worldwide, will become even more so in future. Here we outline a practical, symptom-led, bedside approach to suspecting dementia and its likely diagnosis, inspired by clinical experience and based on recognition of characteristic syndromic patterns. We show how clinical intuition reflects underlying signature profiles of brain involvement by the diseases that cause dementia and suggest next steps that can be taken to define the diagnosis. We propose ‘canaries’ that provide an early warning signal of emerging dementia and highlight the ‘chameleons’ that disguise or mimic this, as well as the ‘zebras’ that herald a rare (and sometimes curable) diagnostic opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

As the number of people worldwide with dementia approaches 50 million, the need for early and accurate diagnosis is more urgent than ever.¹ Timely diagnosis avoids the limbo of diagnostic uncertainty and futile cycles of investigation, equips patients and families to engage appropriate support and to plan for the future, and directs rational and appropriate management.² It will also be essential for the effective deployment of disease-modifying therapies that are on the horizon. However, the early diagnosis of dementia is challenging and remains peculiarly reliant on clinical judgement (**box 1**); the target diseases are complex and affect aspects of higher brain function that are generally not assessed in routine neurological practice. Treatises on dementia conventionally list the clinical features of particular diseases—in the trenches, however, the biggest challenge is often suspecting

dementia in the first place and deciding why this is not ‘just’ Alzheimer’s disease.

Dementia is a syndrome that can be defined very generally as a progressive decline in cognitive function and/or behaviour that impacts daily life functioning. As such, it has a multiplicity of causes. Most of these are neurodegenerative pathologies that are not presently reversible; however, the rare exceptions are not to be missed. A key theme in dementia (especially in neurodegenerative disease) is that the causative pathologies initially target certain brain functions relatively selectively, due to a predilection of pathogenic proteins to involve particular brain networks.³ Over time, these signature patterns become obscured as the spread of pathological change leads to convergent, widespread damage and impairment. The window of greatest opportunity for accurate diagnosis (and anticipated interventions) is therefore early-stage disease. Appreciating how profiles of brain damage relate to cognitive deficits is key to deciding which diseases are likely in patients presenting with suspected dementia.

Here we outline a symptom-led, bedside approach to suspecting dementia that we have found useful in busy neurological clinics. First, we consider clues that help one decide whether or not cognitive decline is present and, if so, the likely cause. We show how these clues predictably reflect underlying signature patterns of brain involvement by causative pathologies and suggest next steps that can be taken to define the diagnosis. As with many other disorders, the neurologist’s essential task is to identify ‘canaries’ that provide an early warning signal of emerging disease, avoid being misled by ‘chameleons’ that disguise or mimic this and remain alert to the occasional ‘zebra’ that heralds a rare (and sometimes curable) diagnosis.

We suggest some general principles and tools for cognitive assessment in **box 1** and

Box 1 Some principles of bedside cognitive assessment**History taking**

- ▶ History is the most important aspect of successful dementia diagnosis.
- ▶ Obtaining a history from reliable informants who know the patient well is integral and interviewing them separately may encourage sharing of sensitive or embarrassing clues to the diagnosis.
- ▶ A minute or two spent putting the patient and family at ease is well invested.
- ▶ How organised and detailed patients seem when describing their symptoms is informative, particularly if at odds with performance on formal cognitive tests.
- ▶ Interpretation of cognitive or behavioural changes depends on an appreciation of the patient's sociocultural background, education, occupation, premorbid language skills, any pre-existing specific developmental or other deficits, and medical and psychiatric history (including medications).
- ▶ Cognitive concerns will most frequently be framed as a non-specific 'memory' problem: this is the most ubiquitous of several potential 'pitfall' symptoms that must be deconstructed (see [table 2](#)).
- ▶ Domains of cognitive function and behaviour that may not be volunteered should also be explored (as these help define the cognitive profile), framing these as questions about functioning in daily life.
- ▶ Particularly in younger people, a detailed family history is essential (including parents' diagnoses and age at death if relevant, and the ages of any siblings).

Examination

- ▶ It is first essential to establish that the patient is alert and cooperative and that their peripheral vision and hearing are adequate (or corrected as appropriate).
- ▶ Observing the patient's conduct and interaction with the examiner and others is often telling (it may point to frontal lobe dysfunction more clearly than any test; see [table 2](#)).
- ▶ To corroborate the history and to build a diagnostic profile of cognitive deficits, it is helpful to have a scheme for testing cognition (a 'walk around the brain', [table 1](#)), armed with some tools to elicit cognitive deficits ([figure 1](#)): the cognitive profile in turn predicts the underlying pattern of brain involvement ([figure 2](#)).
- ▶ Quantitative cognitive assessments such as the Mini-Mental State Examination, the Montreal Cognitive Assessment and Addenbrooke's Cognitive Examination are widely available; however, each has its limitations^{1 33} and none in itself should be used to diagnose or exclude dementia.
- ▶ The general neurological and systemic examinations are essential, particularly for substantiating diagnoses other than Alzheimer's disease (see [tables 3 and 4](#)).

[figure 1](#) and outline a bedside framework for cognitive history taking and examination in [table 1](#). Diagnostic canaries based on characteristic patterns of cerebral involvement are listed in [table 1](#); potential pitfalls are listed in [table 2](#), chameleons in [table 3](#) and zebras in [table 4](#).

DOES THIS PATIENT HAVE DEMENTIA?

Distinguishing early dementia from the 'worried well' or a 'functional' cognitive disorder is an increasingly frequent challenge faced by neurologists as public awareness and anxiety about dementia continue to increase.⁴ A functional cognitive disorder should be considered if there are positive features of internal inconsistency, that is, ability to perform a task well at certain times, but with significant difficulty when it becomes the focus of attention. The person who gives a detailed (or even overinclusive) account of their memory lapses, attributes their difficulties eloquently to specific past events and who is substantially more concerned about their cognitive function than their partner, children or colleagues—often attending clinic unaccompanied—is more likely to be anxious or to have a functional cognitive disorder than dementia. People with obsessional personalities are more prone to overinterpret the imperfections of normal memory. There is often a flavour of wavering concentration, such as being unable to remember why one has entered a room, misplacing household items in odd locations (eg, keys in the fridge) or 'going blank' during a conversation only to have the required information re-emerge soon afterward. Cognitive testing frequently generates considerable anxiety, inducing 'thought-blocking' and performance may vary widely between assessments, often leading to marked inconsistencies (disastrous test scores despite evident competence in daily life). This contrasts with the 'face-saving', humour and minimisation often seen in Alzheimer's disease, or indifference in diseases where insight is impaired. However, particularly in older patients, functional cognitive impairment may signal an emerging neurodegenerative process which declares itself subsequently.

Depression or other primary psychiatric diagnoses must not be overlooked—these are potentially treatable and undetected carry significant risk of harm. There is often a history of previous psychiatric episodes, though this may not be volunteered. Core depressive symptoms are low mood or anhedonia, variably accompanied by fatigue, psychomotor retardation, impaired concentration, a sense of personal worthlessness, significant change in appetite or recurrent morbid thoughts.⁵ Depressed patients are often downcast and disengaged, giving frequent 'don't know' responses. Active psychosis also leads to poor engagement, and there may be evidence of delusional thinking or verbal hallucinations. It is important to keep in mind that anxiety, mood changes and psychosis occur not uncommonly in 'organic' dementias and may be early features^{6 7}; moreover, organic deficits may be elaborated by patients with abnormal illness behaviour, and certain syndromes (such as parietal presentations of Alzheimer's

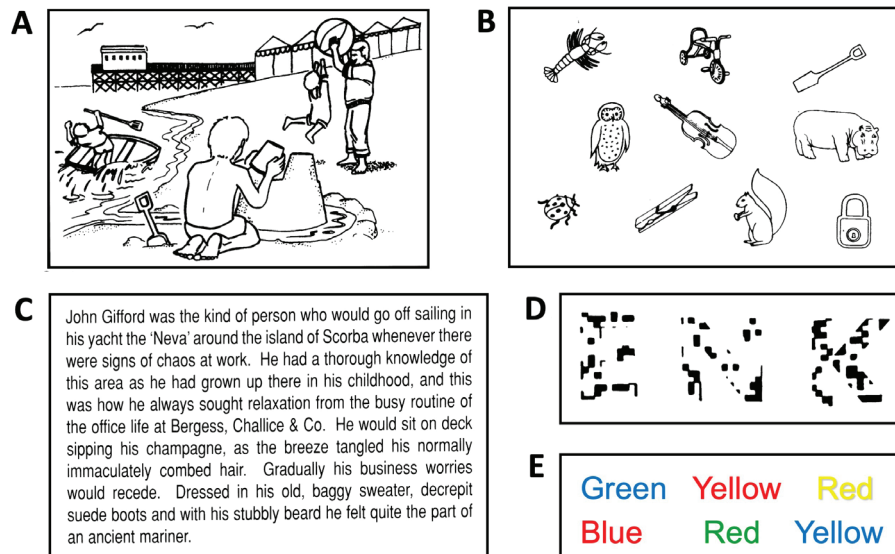


Figure 1 Examples of aids for testing cognition at the bedside. These are some examples of materials that we use to sample a range of cognitive domains (see also table 1 and figure 2) when examining a patient with suspected dementia (shown with permission of Professor E K Warrington). (A) A pictorial scene for description, to assess connected language (fluency, word finding and expressive grammar) and ability to parse a complex environment (visuospatial processing). (B) An array of pictures of familiar items for assessing word retrieval (naming), single-word comprehension (pointing to an item named by the examiner) and subsequent item recall (anterograde episodic memory). (C) A passage for reading aloud to elicit difficulties sounding non-words (personal names, eg, 'Scorba'; phonological dyslexia) or irregular words (eg, 'yacht', regularised as 'yached'; surface dyslexia) or with tracking lines of text (visuospatial processing). (D) Fragmented letters to assess visual apperceptive function. (E) A Stroop task, requiring the patient to state the (conflicting) colour of the ink in which each colour name is printed (in fluent readers of English, a test of response inhibition—one aspect of executive function).

disease and behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia) are notoriously prone to psychiatric mislabelling even by experienced clinicians.

SOME IMPORTANT CANARIES

Alzheimer's disease

Older patients with episodic and topographical memory impairment that declines over time will most commonly have emerging Alzheimer's disease. Details of important events and conversations are not retained, questions become repetitive and there is often a loss of facility with route-finding and a history of becoming lost. There may be a signal 'catastrophic' episode (often, disorientation in unfamiliar surroundings, e.g. while on holiday) preceding more pervasive deterioration. Difficulty following conversations in background noise and dislike of noisy environments (due to impaired auditory scene processing) tend to develop early.⁸ Loss of pleasure in reading (probably multifactorial in nature) is also frequently reported. Retained (partial) awareness of limitations as well as endogenous emotional changes wrought by the disease often lead to loss of confidence or initiative, embarrassment, anxiety and withdrawal from social activities, manifesting in the clinic as a tendency to 'trail' the accompanying person into the room and to turn to them ('head-turning sign') when asked a question.^{6,9} On bedside testing, the extent to which cognitive impairment has been masked by a well-preserved social façade may be surprising: knowledge of current affairs tends to be vague, recall of previously presented items does not benefit from cueing and

topographical material (such as reconstructing the journey to the hospital) may be notably affected.

Beyond memory, parietal cortical functions including word retrieval, praxis, calculation and visuospatial function are affected relatively early in Alzheimer's disease. There may be difficulties with word finding, handling household appliances, managing money or visuospatially demanding activities such as driving or do-it-yourself. Coming to grips with new technology taxes learning, executive and parietal functions and is often particularly challenging.

Dementia with Lewy bodies

Dementia commonly develops in Parkinson's disease (particularly in older patients) and is a core feature of Lewy body pathology.¹⁰ Clues include an early predisposition to severe, prolonged delirium (for example, attending a minor infection or surgical procedure) and sometimes acting out of dream content (REM sleep behaviour disorder, due to loss of normal skeletal muscle atonia). Later, misperceptions and hallucinations (usually predominantly visual) develop, though these may not be volunteered. Initially, they may be brief transients glimpsed in the periphery but evolve into vivid, animate entities (commonly faces, people or animals) that emerge out of background features (such as foliage or a pile of clothes) in stereotyped fashion, particularly under low-light conditions. In contrast to psychotic or dopamine-driven hallucinations, these are typically non-threatening though insight into their nature may be impaired. An 'extracampine'

Table 1 Bedside assessment of the patient with suspected dementia: a ‘walk around the cognitive brain’

Cognitive domain	Leading or early symptoms	Associated symptoms	Examination findings	Brain region(s)	First thoughts
Behaviour (social and emotional)	Loss of empathy/emotional awareness (eg, family events such as funerals, illnesses and warmth toward children/pets) and self-centredness	Disinhibition, loss of initiative, obsessiveness/rituals (eg, clock watching), gluttony/sweet tooth/food faddism, altered interests/humour, loss of insight/anosognosia	Impulsive, inert, disinhibited interaction, ‘1000-yard stare’	Frontal lobe (especially right), right temporal lobe, other	Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia
	Irritability, more anxious and ‘clingy’	Quieter in social situations	Diffident/head turning		Alzheimer’s disease*
Language output (speech sounds, sentences and prosody)	Stumbling over words, especially public speaking	Mixing up ‘yes/no’, mispronunciations, monotonous/odd accent, grammatical/spelling slips	Effortful speech, reduced articulatory agility (repeating syllable strings, eg, ‘puh-kuh-tuh’), impaired repeating single words and following complex commands	Left inferior frontal gyrus/peri-Sylvian†	Non-fluent primary progressive aphasia
	Word-finding difficulty, losing thread of sentences	Reduced speech quantity, pauses	Reduced picture naming	Left temporoparietal junction	Logopenic aphasia
Knowledge of words (vocabulary), objects and concepts	Forgetting names, circumlocutions, vague expressing thoughts and ‘going deaf’	Asking meaning of words, keeping personal ‘dictionaries’ and decline in spelling/understanding written words	Reduced knowledge of specialist vocabulary, ‡ reduced naming of objects/ability to identify pictures/define words named by examiner, surface dyslexia (irregular words, eg, ‘yacht’)	Left anteriorinferior temporal lobe	Semantic primary progressive aphasia
		Difficulty choosing groceries/tools, etc§	Unable to describe/demonstrate use of an object§ (visual agnosia)		
Reading, spelling and calculation	Loss of pleasure reading Less numerical facility (eg, change)	Losing place reading text, difficulty resolving closely spaced text and decline in spelling ability	Difficulty reading blocked text and acalculia on simple mental arithmetic	Left parietal lobe	Posterior cortical atrophy, logopenic aphasia and Alzheimer’s disease
Working memory (verbal)	Poor ‘concentration’	Difficulty holding information for example, a new phone number in mind Losing thread of conversation	Reduced forward (passive) digit span, reduced reverse (active) digit span and reduced repetition of phrases more than words	Left temporoparietal junction/frontal lobe	Logopenic aphasia and Alzheimer’s disease
Action (learnt/voluntary: praxis)	Difficulty learning new devices, loss of facility with do-it-yourself, etc	Difficulty using household gadgets	Ideomotor limb apraxia: impaired copying meaningless/sequential gestures (Luria), ideational limb apraxia: impaired pantomime of learnt actions (eg, tool, waving)	Left parietal lobe	Posterior cortical atrophy and corticobasal syndrome
		Difficulty positioning self in space	Bottom apraxia (difficulty sitting on chair)		
Object analysis (visual)	Loss of facility whistling/singing	Difficulty swallowing	Orofacial apraxia: volitional cough/yawn/blow kiss, etc	Left frontal lobe†	Non-fluent primary progressive aphasia
		Difficulty reading large/unusual (eg, pixelated/CAPTCHA) font; not confident on escalators; often multiple optician visits	Difficulty interpreting complex scenes with patterns, overlaid objects, identifying slopes/steps, etc; difficulty recognising or misrecognising objects in suboptimal viewing conditions	Difficulty perceiving fragmented letters/pictures, distorted views	
Spatial awareness (visual)	Bumps/scrapes in car, difficulty parking and difficulty filling forms, etc	Unable to find items in an array, placing items too close to table edge	Difficulty drawing clockface/copying design/counting dots, finding examiner’s outstretched hand (visual disorientation)	Right parietal lobe	Posterior cortical atrophy and Alzheimer’s disease
Perception (early sensory–visual, auditory, somatic and interoceptive)	Difficulty driving if night-time/raining	Abnormally prolonged after-images (colour ‘washes’, often red/green), visual ‘tilt’ and other distortions	Impaired colour/shape discrimination (e.g., oblong vs square)	Sensory cortices/thalamus¶	Posterior cortical atrophy, ‘visual’ Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease
	‘Double vision’, brief misperceptions	Illusions/hallucinations	Check visual acuity		Dementia with Lewy bodies
	Dislikes noisy environments	Difficulty conversing in noise	Check peripheral hearing		Alzheimer’s disease and variants
	Tinnitus/hyperacusis	Altered pain/temperature awareness	Check basic sensory function		Semantic primary progressive aphasia and behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia

Continued

Table 1 Continued

Cognitive domain	Leading or early symptoms	Associated symptoms	Examination findings	Brain region(s)	First thoughts
Face recognition	Loss of facility recognising faces	'Blanking' familiar people and misidentification of 'impostors'	Impaired famous face recognition**	Right anteroinferior temporal lobe and connections	Semantic primary progressive aphasia and right temporal lobe atrophy††
			Impaired perception of faces (age/gender)	Right temporal lobe/parietal lobe	Alzheimer's disease and dementia with Lewy bodies
Executive function	Disorganised, distractible, poor planning/decision making/multitasking/prioritising, apathetic	Difficulty with inference/abstraction, choosing alternatives, envisaging/learning from consequences and dealing with novelty	Reduced/bizarre verbal fluency (category/letter–number of animals/'S' words in 1 min),‡‡ Stroop task errors, concrete proverb interpretation, inaccurate cognitive estimates (eg, 'How many lions in Belgium?')§§¶¶	Bilateral frontal lobe and connections	May be behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia but depends on associated problems
Memory (episodic and topographical)	More repetitive and less facility with route finding	Vague knowledge of current affairs and getting lost	Orientation to date/time/place, details of hospital journey/stay and incidental recall of pictures from naming test	Hippocampi and connections	Alzheimer's disease (but beware)
	Forgetful, absent-minded	Poor concentration, disorganised	Improves on cueing/foils; 'Did you see a...?')		Vascular/other

This table presents early symptoms ('canaries'; see also table 2) that signal difficulty in each major cognitive domain, together with associated symptoms that may be elicited on history. For each domain, we suggest bedside tests (see also box 1) and features that may be used to corroborate the historical impression and indicate major neuroanatomical associations (see also figure 2) and leading diagnostic considerations.

*Refers to the clinical syndrome of typical (memory-led) Alzheimer's disease.

†Prosody/ singing may be additionally linked to right peri-Sylvian cortical regions

‡Initial loss of knowledge of lower-frequency words reflecting patient's interests/occupation.

§May indicate visual agnosia (the patient with apraxia recognises how an object is used).

¶Usually conjoint 'top-down' abnormalities in attentional/executive/semantic functions.

**Ask for other biographical details if patient cannot name.

††Refers to the syndrome associated with right temporal lobe atrophy, within the behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia spectrum.

‡‡In non-aphasic patients.

§§Dependent on education and culture.

¶¶The manner in which the patient approaches executive tests is also informative, for example, are they impulsive? do they produce odd items on fluency tasks? do they produce overprecise, incorrect estimates that they cannot revise? etc.

sense of a presence beyond the field of vision is common. Marked fluctuations in alertness, attention and cognitive competence even within the course of a day (particularly deterioration later in the day) are also characteristic.¹¹ Complaints of 'double vision' and problems reading (without identifiable ocular pathology) are common, and difficulty using gadgets such as a smartphone exposes executive and parietal dysfunction. Features of associated Parkinsonism (such as hypomimia or gait changes) may be subtle initially but it is worth asking about autonomic symptoms (particularly urinary urgency, nocturia or unexplained collapses).^{12 13}

Vascular cognitive impairment

The most common cognitive syndrome of cerebrovascular disease is not the stepwise decline in function of classical teaching, but an insidious deterioration characterised by disorganisation, loss of verve and initiative, irritability, mental rigidity, emotional lability and other mood changes, and sometimes inappropriate or disinhibited social behaviour. Vascular risk factors are common, but their absence does not exclude the diagnosis. Examination typically reveals cognitive and affective blunting, executive dysfunction, impaired attention and recall (which in contrast to Alzheimer's disease, does generally benefit from cueing) with variable additional, more focal deficits;^{14 15} however these may be over-estimated due to

often significant slowing of mentation. Brisk tendon and pout reflexes (despite flexor plantar responses) where present are characteristic and in more advanced cases gait may be wide-based and shuffling. Dysphagia may develop later in the disease. Though this is one of the few diagnoses in neurology where a compatible scan is *sine qua non*, over-diagnosis of incidental vascular changes is a significant pitfall, compounded by the frequent coexistence of cerebrovascular with primary neurodegenerative pathologies.

SOME CHAMELEONS AND ZEBRAS

Alzheimer's disease variants

Atypical presentations of Alzheimer's disease dominated by non-amnesic deficits are not uncommon, particularly in younger people^{16 17}; conversely, Alzheimer's disease is simulated by a variety of other disease processes.¹⁸ Table 3 summarises some of these chameleons; it is particularly important to consider potentially reversible mimics, such as transient epileptic amnesia or obstructive sleep apnoea.^{18–24} There are three major Alzheimer variant syndromes, likely reflecting differential involvement of the same core temporo-parieto-frontal brain network targeted by Alzheimer pathology (see tables 1 and 2, and figure 2).^{16–18} These variants lie on a clinical continuum and overlap is frequent.

How to do it

Table 2 Some noteworthy potential 'pitfall' symptoms and signs requiring further clarification or interpretation in suspected dementia

Feature	Clarification/interpretation	Major causes
Ambiguous symptoms		
'Poor memory'	Often used as a shorthand for 'cognitive problem'; does it mean episodic memory (events, routes, conversations, etc), semantic memory (words and concepts) or another domain of cognition? If the issue is with memory, is it with encoding information (attention), retaining new information (anterograde memory) or retrieving old information?	Any (may have poor episodic memory in dementia with Lewy bodies, frontotemporal dementia, etc, as well as Alzheimer's disease*)
'Getting lost'	Is this truly difficulty completing a route without assistance (topographical disorientation) or wandering (but ultimately getting there)? A useful question can be 'how would you make your way home from here if you had to do it alone'?	Alzheimer's disease (topography) and behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia (wandering)
'Word-finding difficulty'	Often used as a shorthand for 'language problem'; is it difficulty retrieving the name (very common), loss of vocabulary or difficulty pronouncing the word (uncommon)?	Alzheimer's disease/others (retrieval), semantic primary progressive aphasia (vocabulary) and non-fluent primary progressive aphasia (articulation)
'Lost interest in reading'	Is this a general loss of concentration or initiative, anhedonia, difficulty following the plot or a more specific problem tracking lines of text?	Alzheimer's disease (multifactorial) and posterior cortical atrophy (text tracking)
'Doesn't recognise people'	Is this inability to recall their name (personal anomia, common) or to recognise faces or voices, 'blinking' familiar people? (true prosopagnosia or phonagnosia, uncommon)	Alzheimer's/others (names), semantic primary progressive aphasia/right temporal lobe atrophy† (familiarity)
'More anxious/irritable'	Might be psychiatric (eg, atypical depression) but also an early feature of many 'organic' dementias	Alzheimer's disease, dementia with Lewy bodies, vascular and some frontotemporal dementias (eg, <i>C9orf72</i> mutations)
'Black sheep of family'	Youthful delinquency that contrasts with law-abiding siblings	Latent learning disability, very rarely genetic prion disease
Counterintuitive symptoms		
'Asks meaning of words'	Loss of ability to understand words in a familiar language	Semantic primary progressive aphasia
'Reads fine print but not the headlines'	Visual apperceptive agnosia exposed by non-canonical (eg, very large or pixelated) text	Posterior cortical atrophy
'Can play tennis (etc) but can't find ball on ground'	Static visual localisation more impaired than motion vision (or occasionally the reverse), reflecting separable neuroanatomical substrates	Posterior cortical atrophy
'Says spouse is impostor'	Misidentification delusion (Capgras, etc), can also be for location (eg, asks to go 'home' in own house)	Alzheimer's disease, dementia with Lewy bodies
'Much nastier/nicer now'	Altered interpersonal awareness and conduct	Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia (nasty) and Alzheimer's disease (nice)
'Become very musical/religious/punctual/good at Sudoku'	Enhanced (sometimes loss of) interest/ability in abstract pursuits, usually with loss of interest/affection for other people, on a spectrum of alterations ranging from basic rewards (sweet food and sleep), through sense of humour and timekeeping, to puzzles/complex stimuli	Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia and semantic primary progressive aphasia
Potentially misleading symptoms		
'It all started after that... (accident/operation, etc)'	Usually, this is attribution bias; occasionally we have seen cases where severe psychological trauma did seem to provoke catastrophic cognitive decline in a previously asymptomatic person	Any
'Distant memories are fine'	Usually they are not, but highly overlearned or emotional memories tend to become the focus of cherished anecdote	Alzheimer's disease
'Poor short-term memory'	To a neuropsychologist, this refers to the immediate span of working memory (up to ~30s) but used colloquially to refer to recent episodic memory of variable span	Any
'Thinks people are stealing from them'	Usually not a harbinger of psychosis but a specific delusion of theft (or infidelity)	Alzheimer's disease, dementia with Lewy bodies
'Going deaf'	Peripheral hearing should always be checked but in context may signify difficulty understanding word meaning	Semantic primary progressive aphasia
'Always been spiritual'	Apparent receptivity to 'ghosts'/presences may signify visual/extracampine hallucinations	Dementia with Lewy bodies
'Unexplained aches/pains'	Hypochondriasis can occasionally reflect abnormal processing of interoceptive signals such as pain	Right temporal lobe atrophy and semantic primary progressive aphasia

Continued

Table 2 Continued

Feature	Clarification/interpretation	Major causes
Signs not to miss/misinterpret		
Bottom apraxia	Difficulty orienting/positioning self in space as when sitting down in a chair	Posterior cortical atrophy and corticobasal syndrome
Closing in	Patients overlay their hand or drawing on examiner's target—feature of organic apraxia	Alzheimer's disease and posterior cortical atrophy
'(Vicar of) Dibley' sign	Binary reversals during conversation—says 'yes' but means 'no', etc	Non-fluent primary progressive aphasia
Dysprosodia (isolated)	Most cases of 'foreign accent syndrome' (recognisable as such, sometimes simulated with pantomime exuberance) will be functional, but occasionally patients present with altered prosody and linguistic deficits only supervene (much) later	Non-fluent primary progressive aphasia
Executive dysfunction	As used, for example, in neuropsychological reports, it is not synonymous with 'frontal lobe problem' but reflects processing across distributed brain networks; moreover, patients with significant frontal lobe dysfunction (as reflected in abnormal behaviour) may perform well on executive tests	Any
Head-turning	To accompanying person, during history taking—lack of confidence/retained awareness of problem/poor memory	Alzheimer's disease
Perioral dyskinesias	Subtle trembling movements of lips/lower face	Alzheimer's disease (younger onset)
Pigeon sign	Turns head this way and that, trying to make sense of a picture or visual array	Posterior cortical atrophy
Repetitiveness conversing	Signifies an organic problem with anterograde episodic memory/accelerated forgetting	Alzheimer's disease
Semantic paraphasias	Substitution of related words on a naming task usually will not reflect a primary semantic problem but more likely anomia (impaired word retrieval) with attempted compensation	Alzheimer's disease, others
Surface dyslexia	Sounds irregularly pronounced words as they are printed, due to loss of vocabulary-based reading	Semantic primary progressive aphasia
'Thousand yard stare'	Sense of unease/threat conveyed by patient who lacks normal social facial microreactivity	Right temporal lobe atrophy
Tie sign	Patient touches examiner's tie/face when trying to locate their outstretched hand, due to visuospatial disorientation	Posterior cortical atrophy
'Variable deficit'	Apraxia is intrinsically variable; organic cognitive impairment of any cause can be impacted by stress or fatigue, and certain entities are characterised by marked fluctuation† (sometimes sleep benefit/deterioration), due to seizures, channel dysfunction or impaired dopaminergic/cholinergic switching between brain states	Dementia with Lewy bodies (sleep benefit), transient epileptic amnesia (sleep deterioration), inflammatory, immune

*Refers to the clinical syndrome of typical (memory-led) Alzheimer's disease.

†Refers to the syndrome associated with right temporal lobe atrophy, within the behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia spectrum.

‡Not the same as inconsistency—organic cognitive fluctuations are internally consistent.

Posterior cortical atrophy, the 'visual variant' of Alzheimer's disease, usually presents with impairments of visuospatial awareness, reading and praxis.¹⁷ Beware the patient who has made numerous futile visits to the optician or who describes more difficulty reading pixelated signs than newsprint (signifying visual apperceptive agnosia): this is the cardinal degenerative disorder of the visual brain, disrupting the interpretation of visual scenes despite normal sensory acuity. There is usually a full hand of accompanying parietal lobe deficits, but episodic memory early on is often well preserved.

Logopenic aphasia is the language-led variant of Alzheimer's disease within the primary progressive aphasia spectrum.²⁵ It is characterised by prominent word-finding difficulty, conversational pauses (sentences tend to trail off) with speech sound (phonological) errors and, on examination, impaired repetition of phrases despite intact

repetition of single words (due to reduced verbal working memory).²⁶

The 'frontal' (behavioural/dysexecutive) variant of Alzheimer's disease remains the least well defined.²⁷ Clinically, it can closely resemble the behavioural variant of frontotemporal dementia, but prominent accompanying memory impairment and confabulation may be bedside clues to the diagnosis.

Frontotemporal dementia syndromes

Among the 'zebras' of dementia diagnosis, the frontotemporal dementias are particularly important because they are collectively a major cause of dementia in middle life and wreak havoc on social and occupational functioning. This is a diverse group of diseases with complex neurobiology²⁸; however, three major clinical presentations are recognised.

How to do it

Table 3 Some important 'chameleons' of dementia diagnosis

Disease	Chameleons	Some useful features to identify the chameleon
Alzheimer's disease	Mimics*	
	Transient epileptic amnesia†	Clinical seizures (not invariable), prominent fluctuation, 'vacational' amnesia‡; abnormal (extended) EEG, may have other features of limbic encephalitis, auto-antibodies / cancer
	Obstructive sleep apnoea†	Daytime somnolence, non-refreshing sleep, heavy snoring (from partner); abnormal sleep study
	Normal-pressure hydrocephalus†	May have gait apraxia, urinary dysfunction; MRI hydrocephalus and associated features
	Vascular	MRI: strategic (eg, thalamic) infarct, other vascular patterns (including deep micro-haemorrhages)
	Traumatic brain injury/chronic traumatic encephalopathy	History of significant (especially recurrent) head trauma
	Dementia with Lewy bodies frontotemporal dementia and other neurodegenerative disorders	Vary according to underlying pathology; may have genetic mutation (frontotemporal dementia, familial prion), some entities (eg, argyrophilic grain disease, limbic-predominant age-related TDP-43 encephalopathy) currently only diagnosed post mortem
	Variants	
	Posterior cortical atrophy	Positive Alzheimer markers in CSF (raised total / phospho-tau, reduced beta-amyloid42 and beta-amyloid42/40 ratio), cortical micro-haemorrhages associated with amyloid angiopathy
	Logopenic aphasia	
	Behavioural variant frontotemporal-like	
Corticobasal syndrome		
Young onset (sporadic)		
Rapid (may have beta-amyloid angiitis)	Positive Alzheimer CSF and MRI markers, cortical microhaemorrhages/siderosis on MRI	
Familial	Young, autosomal dominant family history (may be censored); may have spastic paraparesis/other neurological signs (especially <i>PS1</i> mutations), prominent neuropsychiatric features, white matter change on MRI; <i>PS1</i> , <i>PS2</i> or <i>APP</i> mutation (in addition to Alzheimer CSF markers)	
Dementia with Lewy bodies	Mimics	
	Progressive supranuclear palsy and corticobasal syndrome	Supranuclear gaze palsy, prominent asymmetric apraxia/axial rigidity; poor levodopa response
	Variants	
	Alzheimer-like	Florid delirium, prominent fluctuations, early visual hallucinations, REM sleep behaviour disorder, emerging parkinsonism
	Behavioural variant frontotemporal-like	
Rapid		
Vascular cognitive impairment	Mimics	
	Infectious/inflammatory/autoimmune‡	Suggestive history, autoantibodies, blood/CSF serology (eg, human immunodeficiency virus and syphilis)
	Genetic arteriopathies	Young, lack of vascular risk factors, suggestive family history; migraine, psychiatric features, MRI involvement of anterior temporal lobe, <i>NOTCH3</i> mutations with CADASIL
	Primary leukodystrophies	Young, lack of vascular risk factors, suggestive MRI (confluent, symmetric white matter change), positive diagnostic tests
	Variants	
Behavioural variant frontotemporal-like	MRI: significant vascular change, lack of suggestive atrophy profile	
Prominent amnesic/focal 'cortical' deficits	MRI: strategic infarct (especially thalamus, parietal)	
Frontotemporal dementia§	Mimics	
	'Frontotemporal dementia phenocopy' (especially older men)	Normal brain MRI/ fluorodeoxyglucose-PET; some frontotemporal dementia cases (especially <i>C9orf72</i> mutations) may be very slowly progressive—phenocopy cases often show better preserved insight than is usual with frontotemporal dementia
	Frontal variant of Alzheimer's disease	Prominent associated episodic memory deficit, relatively prominent posterior atrophy on MRI, Alzheimer biomarkers (CSF, amyloid PET)
	Vascular	MRI: vascular features
	Dementia with Lewy bodies	Visual hallucinations, REM sleep behaviour disorder
	Variants	
	Amnesic/Alzheimer-like	Negative Alzheimer biomarkers
	Corticobasal syndrome	May have <i>GRN</i> mutation
	Motor neurone disease	May have <i>C9orf72</i> mutations
Very young onset/rapid	MRI: disproportionate caudate atrophy (FUS-opathy)	

Here, chameleons are either 'mimics'—a different disease that presents similarly to the typical syndrome, listed in the left-most column—or 'variants'—an alternative, atypical presentation of the same disease process that causes the typical syndrome.

*Negative Alzheimer markers may be helpful but Alzheimer pathology frequently coexists with other entities (seizures, obstructive sleep apnoea more common in Alzheimer's disease).

†Potentially reversible process.

‡No recollection at all of salient events such as vacations (typically in Alzheimer's disease, there is some recollection of the episode, although degraded).

§Presentation with behavioural variant here taken to be typical (clinical mimics of primary progressive aphasia syndromes are very uncommon).

APP, amyloid precursor protein; CADASIL, cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy; *C9orf72*, mutation of chromosome 9 open reading frame 72; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; EEG, electroencephalogram; FUS, fused-in-sarcoma protein; GRN, progranulin gene; NOTCH3, neurogenic locus notch homolog protein 3 mutations; PET, positron emission tomography; PS1, presenilin 1 gene mutation; PS2, presenilin 2 gene mutation.

Table 4 Some important 'zebras' in dementia diagnosis

Leading clue	Candidate diagnoses		Key investigations
	Sporadic	Genetic*	
Unusual			
Socioemotional decline leading	Reduced empathy, disinhibition, apathy, obsessionality, stereotypes, altered eating behaviour, executive deficits; atypical parkinsonism (progressive supranuclear palsy/corticobasal syndrome) frequent later	Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia	MRI (figure 2), but atrophy highly variable and may be subtle; may have associated midbrain atrophy (progressive supranuclear palsy), genetics
Language decline leading	Effortful, misarticulated, apraxic speech, binary reversals, grammatical errors, orofacial apraxia; atypical parkinsonism (progressive supranuclear palsy/corticobasal syndrome) frequent later	Non-fluent primary progressive aphasia	MRI (figure 2), but atrophy variable; genetics if young/suspicious family history
Visuospatial decline leading	Loss of vocabulary, severe anomia with impaired single word comprehension despite fluent well-structured speech, often frontotemporal dementia-like behaviours	Semantic primary progressive aphasia	MRI (figure 2) characteristic
	Anomia/word-finding pauses, phonemic errors, phrase repetition/verbal working memory deficits	Logopenic aphasia (usually Alzheimer pathology)	MRI asymmetric (predominantly left-sided) temporoparietal atrophy, CSF Alzheimer markers
	Difficulty reading unusual fonts/night driving/using gadgets, mispositioning items; later apperceptive agnosia/disorientation, dyscalculia, anomia	Posterior cortical atrophy (usually Alzheimer pathology; some dementia with Lewy bodies, others)	MRI (figure 2), CSF Alzheimer markers
'Frontal'—ataxia	Also urinary urgency/incontinence	Normal-pressure hydrocephalus†	MRI ventriculomegaly and associated features
	May have history of prior neurological episodes	Multiple sclerosis (especially primary/secondary progressive)	MRI (brain/cord) demyelination features, CSF unmatched oligoclonal bands
	History of cranial irradiation (often delayed), also pyramidal/other neurological signs	Post-irradiation vasculopathy	MRI extensive white matter damage
Rapid†	Early widespread cognitive impairment (often prominent visual dysfunction), myoclonus/other neurological signs	Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (classically), Alzheimer's disease, dementia with Lewy bodies (uncommonly)	MRI cortical/basal ganglia signal change, EEG (periodic complexes—Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease), CSF (RT-QuIC, Alzheimer markers), DAT (?dementia with Lewy bodies), genetics
	Frontotemporal dementia plus deltoid/triceps fasciculations, pyramidal signs	Frontotemporal dementia—motor neurone disease	MRI, EMG (often normal), genetics
	Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia-like plus corticobasal syndrome, atypical parkinsonism, young, markedly obsessive/stereotypical behaviour	Frontotemporal dementia (FUS-opathy)¶	MRI marked caudate atrophy
	Headache, fluctuation, seizures, systemic features	Vasculitis (CNS/systemic)†	MRI, CT angiogram, CSF pleocytosis, autoantibodies/inflammatory markers; consider brain biopsy
	Seizures, jerks, dyskinesias, fluctuation, neuropsychiatric/autonomic/ systemic features	Limbic encephalitis†	MRI high signal in hippocamp/medial temporal lobe, autoantibodies, whole body-PET/neoplasia screens
	Executive/behavioural decline with gait disturbance/variable other neurological features	Tumour (eg, lymphoma), subdural haematoma, other space-occupying lesion†	MRI mass/gadolinium enhancement, may have non-CNS primary, may need brain biopsy
	Immunosuppressed, compatible history of infection	Human immunodeficiency virus, human herpes viruses, progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy, tuberculosis, syphilis, Whipple's disease, tungait†, subacute sclerosing panencephalitis	MRI abnormal signal/gadolinium enhancement, blood/CSF serology

Continued

Table 4 Continued

Leading clue	Candidate diagnoses		Key investigations
	Syndromic features (especially early)	Genetic*	
Young adult,** neurological	Toxic exposure/dietary deficiency states	Alcohol usually nutritional, especially thiamine (Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome); heroin/other drug abuse, lithium toxicity/iatrogenic, metalst	MRI various patterns with white/grey matter involvement, abnormal signal; drug, metabolic, metal screens
	Ataxia	Paraneoplastic†, superficial siderosis	Spinocerebellar ataxias, Niemann-Pick C, Fragile X, mitochondrial, dentatorubral pallidolysian atrophy, Kufs' disease, prion
	Akinetic-rigid		Huntington's disease, Wilson's disease,† neurodegeneration with brain iron accumulation (various)
	Autonomic	Sarcoidosis†	Porphyria, adrenoleukodystrophy, hereditary sensory and autonomic neuropathy 1E, familial fatal insomnia
	Buccolingual mutilation	Antiphospholipid, rheumatological†	Neuroacanthocytosis, Lesch-Nyhan
	Chorea/dystonia		Huntington's disease, Wilson's disease,† neuroacanthocytosis, neuronal brain iron accumulation disorders, dentatorubral pallidolysian atrophy, Kufs' disease (especially facial)
	Deafness (peripheral)	Susac's syndrome,† Behçet's disease,† siderosis, sarcoidosis†	Mitochondrial, hereditary sensory and autonomic neuropathy 1E
	Eye abnormalities	Behçet's disease, sarcoidosis, Susac's syndrome†	Kayser-Fleischer rings: Wilson's disease† Cataract: cerebrotendinous xanthomatosis†, myotonic dystrophy, mitochondrial Retinopathy: mitochondrial
	Gaze palsy	Chronic meningitides (inflammatory/neoplastic)†	Gaze apraxia: Huntington's disease Supranuclear gaze palsy: (vertical) Niemann-Pick C, (horizontal) spinocerebellar ataxia type 2, Gaucher's† External ophthalmoplegia: mitochondrial
	Peripheral neuropathy	Sarcoidosis†	Mitochondrial, neuroacanthocytosis, Fabry's,† spinocerebellar ataxias, metachromatic leukodystrophy, adrenoleukodystrophy, hereditary sensory and autonomic neuropathy 1E, cerebrotendinous xanthomatosis,† porphyria†
			Spinocerebellar ataxias, familial IAD (especially PS1), adrenoleukodystrophy, Krabbe's
	Systemic	Pyramidal signs	Poor control, anticonvulsants†
Seizures (especially myoclonic)			CADASIL, cerebral amyloid angiopathies (familial), Fabry's†
Strokes		Antiphospholipid syndrome†	Wilson's disease,† Gaucher's,† mitochondrial, porphyria†
Hepatic/gastrointestinal Musculoskeletal abnormalities		Hepatic encephalopathy† Rheumatological†	Paget's disease, inclusion body myopathy: VCP Tendon xanthomas: cerebrotendinous xanthomatosis† Bone cysts: polycystic lipomembranous osteodysplasia with sclerosing leukoencephalopathy

Continued

Table 4 Continued

Leading clue	Candidate diagnoses		Key investigations
	Syndromic features (especially early)	Sporadic	
Renal impairment Skin abnormalities Splenomegaly	Uraemic encephalopathy† Behçet's disease, rheumatological‡	Genetic* Fabry's,† mitochondrial Fabry's‡ Niemann-Pick C, Gaucher's‡†	

This list is not exhaustive.

*Family history suggesting autosomal dominant or maternal inheritance in successive generations is particularly helpful but may be censored or absent (these patients also tend to be younger).

†Potentially treatable process.

‡Slower onset may also occur in some cases

§Although genetic prion diseases tend to be rapid, some present indolently.

¶Can be suspected but not presently confirmed during life.

**Leading features, not covered above —these tend to be the most striking features but various combinations occur.

††CADASIL, cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy; CNS, central nervous system; C9orf72, mutation of chromosome 9 open reading frame 72; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; DAT, dopamine transporter scan; EEG, electroencephalogram; EMG, electromyogram; FUS, fused-in-sarcoma protein; GRN, granulin gene mutations; MAP1, microtubule associated protein tau mutations; PET, positron emission tomography; P51, presenilin 1; RT-QuIC, real-time quaking-induced conversion prion protein detection; VCP, valosin-containing protein gene mutation.

The behavioural variant of frontotemporal dementia presents with abnormalities of social and emotional awareness and reactivity.^{28 29} The patient generally lacks insight, but the family complains bitterly that they have 'changed', typically with loss of warmth and social skills (there may have been embarrassing faux pas), and frequently prominent apathy, rituals and/or impulsivity that may have resulted in loss of a job or ill-advised decisions. Gluttony and development of a pathological sweet tooth are characteristic, exemplifying a much broader repertoire of odd, inflexible and maladaptive behaviours with valuation of abstract or impersonal interests over other people. These features may be particularly striking in patients with selective right temporal lobe atrophy,³⁰ who also frequently exhibit prosopagnosia. Behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia is challenging to diagnose, particularly early on, as there are few reliable biomarkers. Patients may do well on formal cognitive (including executive) tests. There are several highly pertinent clinical issues surrounding the diagnosis: it is genetically mediated in up to perhaps a third of cases (genetic testing for the three major causative, autosomal dominant mutations should be considered in all younger patients) and vigilant neurological follow-up is indicated, both to detect the emergence of major associations (atypical parkinsonism or motor neurone disease) and to identify patients who fail to manifest abnormalities on brain MRI or metabolic (fluorodeoxyglucose - positron emission tomography (FDG-PET) or single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT)) imaging. The nosological status of these latter 'phenocopy' cases is still unclear.

Among language-led dementia syndromes (the primary progressive aphasia), the non-fluent/agrammatic variant is the most immediately clinically striking. These patients characteristically have effortful, unmelodious, misarticulated 'apraxic' speech and their utterances may be terse and agrammatic ('telegraphic'). Early on, there may be particular difficulty with public speaking, reversing of 'yes' and 'no' or re-emergence of a childhood stutter. Initially, naming and comprehension are largely intact and written expression is usually more fluent than speech.^{25 26} As the syndrome evolves, impairments of orofacial praxis (affecting volitional movements such as whistling) and dysphagia often supervene, frequently with emergence of an extrapyramidal syndrome in the corticobasal—progressive supranuclear palsy spectrum.

In contrast, the semantic variant of primary progressive aphasia presents with increasingly circumlocutory and vacant speech that is well constructed and fluent (even garrulous). These patients characteristically have asked family members the meanings of words ('What's a tornado?') and often compile personal 'dictionaries'. They have early, profound anomia, underpinned by impaired single-word comprehension and vocabulary loss affecting all language channels, often extending to a tendency to sound irregular words (such as 'sew') as they are printed ('surface dyslexia'^{25 26}). The true

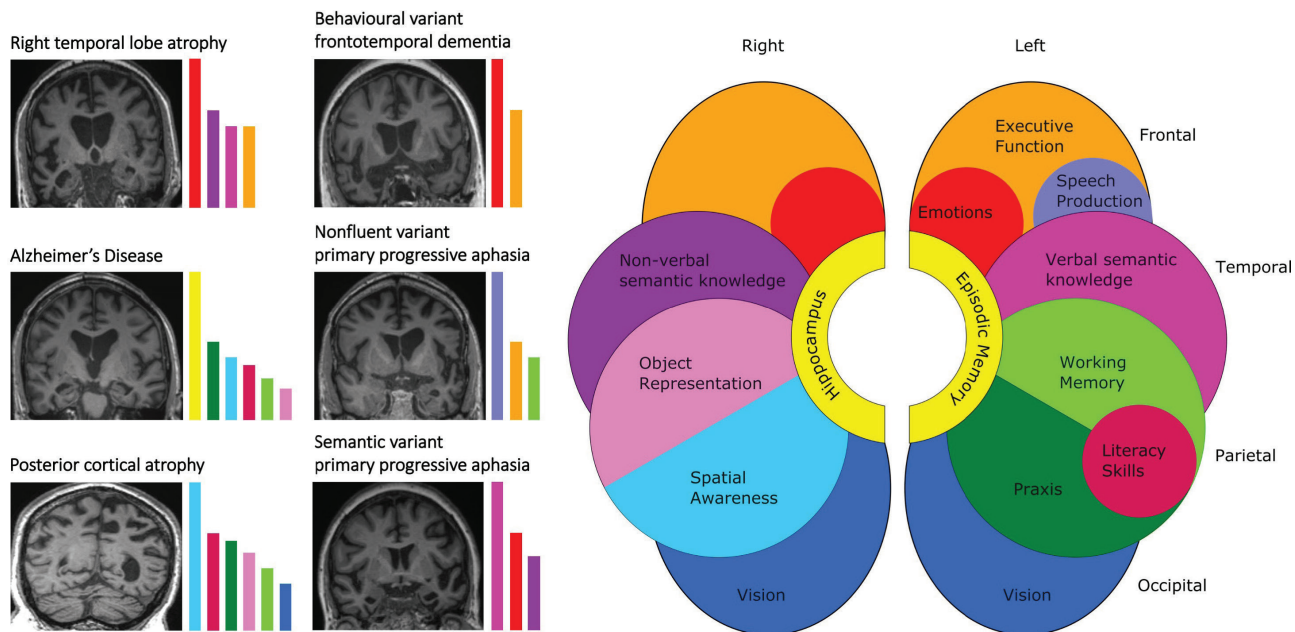


Figure 2 Cognitive and neuroanatomical profiles of some major dementia syndromes. The cartoon brain (right) shows cognitive functions predominantly mediated by different cerebral regions in each cerebral hemisphere. The T1-weighted coronal MRI sections (left) show characteristic patterns of regional brain atrophy in representative neurodegenerative disorders (typical *Alzheimer's disease*—disproportionate, bilateral hippocampal atrophy; *behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia*—predominant bilateral but asymmetric, frontal and anterior temporal lobe atrophy; *non-fluent/agrammatic variant primary progressive aphasia*—predominantly left-sided, anterior peri-Sylvian cortical atrophy; *posterior cortical atrophy*—predominant biparietal atrophy; *semantic variant primary progressive aphasia*—selective, predominantly left-sided anteromesial and inferior temporal lobe atrophy; *right temporal lobe atrophy*—selective, predominantly right-sided anterior temporal lobe atrophy). In each case, the dementia syndrome reflects a profile of brain network breakdown (see also table 1); this correspondence is indicated by the coloured histograms alongside each scan, which code the cognitive domains pre-eminently affected in each syndrome. The histogram colours follow the same convention as the brain cartoon; the heights of the histogram bars are arbitrary but indicate the relative clinical prominence of deficits across cognitive domains that are typically seen in a particular syndrome. The left hemisphere is projected on the right (following standard clinical convention) throughout.

nature of this syndrome is captured in its older designation, ‘semantic dementia’: this is the paradigmatic disorder of the semantic memory system that mediates knowledge about words, objects and concepts. As it evolves, non-verbal semantic knowledge about visual and other sensory objects and about the emotional and social signals of other people also disintegrates. Patients generally develop a behavioural syndrome similar to behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia. In our experience, there is invariably focal, asymmetric,

usually predominantly left-sided anterior temporal lobe atrophy on brain MRI at presentation (figure 2); if this is absent, we hesitate to invoke the diagnosis.

Other ‘zebras’

These are many and diverse (table 4): clues to their presence include younger age of onset, a family history of younger onset dementia (often labelled as Alzheimer’s disease or psychiatric illness), prominent extracognitive neurological or systemic features or a rapid course. The last group includes catastrophic illnesses such as prion disease but also several reversible processes that demand careful exclusion (table 4). Diagnosis of the many rare diseases that cause dementia in younger adults due to metabolic, inflammatory, storage and other inherited disorders generally depends on clinical features or markers beyond cognition^{31 32}; these disorders tend to produce a fairly nondescript ‘fronto-subcortical’ cognitive syndrome led by executive and neuropsychiatric dysfunction.

NEXT STEPS AFTER SUSPECTING DEMENTIA

If available, more detailed cognitive testing with a neuropsychologist is often a valuable extension to the bedside assessment to: quantify suspected deficits

Key points

- ▶ Dementia is a syndrome of progressive decline in cognitive function and/or behaviour that impacts upon daily life functioning and has multiple potential causes.
- ▶ Timely diagnosis is desirable and achievable with a systematic approach to cognitive assessment.
- ▶ The major dementias target particular brain networks and accordingly have distinct phenotypes.
- ▶ The diagnosis rests primarily on clinical assessment, with neuropsychological, neuroimaging and biomarker support where appropriate.

in relation to age-appropriate norms and premorbid attainment; detect deficits in domains (such as executive function) that are challenging to assess at the bedside; and compare performance over serial assessments, which may be diagnostic in cases of clinical doubt.

Any patient with suspected dementia should have brain imaging (ideally MRI)—occasionally this will show a surgically remediable process but more generally it defines the profile of atrophy in neurodegenerative diseases (figure 2) and detects signal alterations such as those associated with cerebrovascular disease, leukodystrophies and prion disease. Serial imaging of change over a year or more can be informative if the first scan is normal. Conversely, frontal or parietal ‘atrophy’ is quite commonly overinterpreted on MRI. Brain FDG-PET or SPECT is sometimes useful to demonstrate regional cerebral hypometabolism where Alzheimer’s disease or a frontotemporal dementia is suspected but MRI is inconclusive.

Although basic haematological and metabolic screens are worthwhile to detect potentially reversible factors that may contribute to cognitive decline, these are rarely the primary culprit. Diagnostic markers of dementia are currently largely derived from CSF analysis, which should be considered in anyone with younger onset dementia (arbitrarily, before the age of 65 years) or rapid evolution, when it is likely to have the most useful predictive value (see tables 3 and 4)—relevant CSF constituents include cells and oligoclonal bands (pointers to brain inflammation), neurofilament light chain (a non-specific indicator of the presence and severity of neuronal damage) and more specific protein profiles of Alzheimer pathology (raised total and phospho-tau, elevated tau:beta-amyloid42 or beta-amyloid40:amyloid42 ratio).

Diagnostic testing for causative genetic mutations should be considered in younger patients where there is a compatible phenotype and in particular a suggestive (autosomal dominant) family history, but only after appropriately informed counselling in the clinic, particularly with respect to the implications for other family members. Other more specialised investigations may be appropriate in certain clinical contexts (see table 4).

Local services should be engaged for support early and people with atypical forms of Alzheimer’s disease or non-Alzheimer dementias can be directed to Rare Dementia Support (<https://www.raredementiasupport.org/>).

CONCLUSIONS

Early and accurate diagnosis of dementia is desirable and achievable, but it must first be suspected. As always in neurology, pattern recognition is key. The first challenge is to determine whether dementia is likely and then, based on a functionally oriented history and systematic examination, to determine the profile of cerebral involvement and thus the candidate underlying pathology. Despite a growing array of ancillary

Further reading

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tools, clinical judgement is likely to remain essential and indeed, to assume even greater importance as effective treatments become available.

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