metabolites, and receptors in the striatum and medial frontal cortex. These changes have been related to cognitive disorders and depression in patients with both these disorders.

Cholinergic system

Repeatedly reported shrinkage and depletion of cholinergic neurons in the magnocellular part of the basal nucleus of Meynert are accompanied by decreased choline acetyltransferase activity in the neocortex by 85% to 91%. In Parkinson's disease, cell loss averages 30% to 40% without correlation with age or duration of illness, and is much higher in demented parkinsonian patients in whom it approaches the values in Alzheimer's disease (50% to 70%) than in non-demented patients (0% to 40%) who show neuronal losses only slightly higher than those in normal aged controls. Even more severe depletion of the basal nucleus of Meynert with 75% to 80% loss or large cholinergic neurons has been found in Lewy body dementia which correlates well with recent biochemical data. The heterogeneity of degeneration of cholinergic neurons in the basal forebrain and the variability in nucleus basalis cell depletion and loss of cholinergic markers in the neocortex and hippocampus is suggestive of a specific Lewy body or Alzheimer type pathology, suggesting a primary degenerative process of the cholinergic forebrain system in Parkinson's disease, while secondary retrograde degeneration proposed for Alzheimer's disease has not been confirmed by defective retrograde transport of nerve growth factor to the basal nucleus in the brains of patients with Alzheimer's disease.

In conclusion, there are still some conflicting data on the neurochemical and pathological basis of behavioural changes in dementia disorders, the elucidation of which will be a major task for modern neurosciences.

K A JELLINGER

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Clinical Neurology, Lainz Hospital, Wolkergasse 1, A-1130 Vienna, Austria


Esiri, in her editorial about behavioural disturbances in dementia makes a common, and I believe important error in her classification scheme of behavioural abnormalities. She lumps apathy, withdrawal, and listlessness with tearfulness and "other manifestations of unhappiness" as part of "depressive behavioural disturbances". Actually her depressive category is further separated into two distinct categories: (1) behaviour characterized by diminished activities and interactions often accompanied by slowness. Apathy, increased inertia, and abulia are terms often used to describe diminished spontaneous behaviour, long latency in responding to queries and requests for action, and difficulty persevering with tasks. Many apathetic, abulic patients are not sad or discouraged. Many have no associated mood abnormalities and most have little insight into their apathy. Lesions of the caudate nucleus, medial thalamus, rostral brainstem tegmentum, and frontal lobes can cause such inert states. (2) Mood abnormalities that include sadness, crying, discouragement, depression etc.

True enough, many depressed patients have diminished activities but it is a great mistake to attribute all apathy, decreased activity, and inertia to depression. Apathy and diminished activities are a common presentation of caudate and thalamic infarcts, frontal lobe tumours, and progressive super-nuclear palsy. The term "psychomotor retardation" is often used by psychiatrists to indicate depression, but the distinction between apathy and depression, should be thought of as different phenomena that are often but not necessarily related.

L R CAPLAN

Department of Neurology, New England Medical Center No 314, 750 Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02111, USA


Esiri replies to Jellinger and Caplan:

I am grateful to Jellinger for adding supplementary information to that presented in my editorial. I was necessarily selective in such a condensed account of a complicated subject and largely limited my comments to findings that related to behavioural disturbances in dementia. I would emphasise the importance of neurological disease, the studies of the cholinergic system referred to by Jellinger, while of interest, have not specifically examined the relevance of cholinergic changes for behaviour in dementia, an area that certainly deserves attention.

The comments that Caplan makes about the desirability of subdividing my depressive category of behaviour into apathy and depressed mood, as reflected in evident unhappiness or crying, are well taken. I was intending only to indicate broad categories of behavioural change but agree that it is best to avoid assumptions about which individual types of behaviour go together, particularly in demented subjects who are often unable to give a direct account of subjective feelings. In searching for neurochemical correlates of behavioural change in dementia we have tried to avoid making assumptions about which types of behaviour are related, although analysis of detailed, prospectively acquired, data suggest that there are specific constellations of symptoms that cluster together (T Hope, unpublished data).

I would agree that there are some conflicting data on the neurochemical basis of behavioural change in dementia. In such a complex area of investigation it would be surprising if there were not. The important point is that prospective studies are being undertaken that are likely to resolve the differences and uncover new findings that have a direct bearing on the optimal way to manage the difficult behavioural problems that people with dementia suffer from.

MARGARET ESIRI
MATTERS ARISING: Esiri replies to Jellinger and Caplan:

Margaret Esiri

*J Neural Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1997 62: 304
doi: 10.1136/jnnp.62.3.304-a

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://jnnp.bmj.com/content/62/3/304.2.citation

**Email alerting service**

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

**Notes**

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/