

## Language disintegration: communication ability in elderly immigrants with dementia

About 46.8 million people worldwide are estimated to have dementia and this number will almost double every 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Most countries have an ageing population with an increasing number of immigrants, and many of these elderly immigrants will develop dementia in a country other than that of their origin.

In various dementia disorders language deficits have increased, especially at a later stage of dementia,<sup>2</sup> often shown by difficulties with word-finding (anomia). Individuals with anomia struggle to use the correct words.<sup>2</sup> Thus far, insufficient attention has been given to the assessment of communicative abilities in people with dementia.<sup>3</sup>

Loss of language might precede other aspects of cognitive decline<sup>2</sup> and could be an early indicator for development of cognitive decline or dementia.<sup>4</sup> Language loss is often asymmetrical, with preferential preservation and use of the first-acquired language (ie, language reversion).<sup>5</sup> Maintenance of proficiency in multiple languages requires increased cognitive demands compared with a single language. Consequently, non-primary languages appear particularly vulnerable to the effects of cognitive decline.<sup>4</sup> Caring for elderly migrants with language loss can therefore be a challenge for health-care providers.

Language reversion often occurs in immigrants with dementia because pathological processes cause reversion to the native language.<sup>4,5</sup> Culturally and linguistically diverse elderly people with dementia face many unique challenges and needs<sup>6</sup> because of impairment of verbal and non-verbal language, which worsens with the degenerative process of dementia.<sup>2</sup> Bilingual people with dementia also

tend to mix languages and have problems with language separation.<sup>7</sup>

Communication is essential for social life, regardless of cognitive function, and for avoiding isolation, strengthening patients' identity, and decreasing depression and anxiety.<sup>8</sup> With a growing ageing population and increased global migration, language reversion is an upcoming and challenging topic that has received little research attention. Assessment of elderly immigrants is necessary for adapting health-care services and interventions. Dissemination of accumulated knowledge from studies about elderly migrants and language is urgently needed.

We declare no competing interests.

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