A support programme for patients with dementia and their caregivers lowered institutionalisation rates initially


QUESTION: In patients with dementia, does a 2 year support programme based on nurse case management prolong care in the community?

Conclusions
In patients with dementia, the rate of institutionalisation was lower for those who received a support programme than those who received usual care during the first months, but the difference decreased with time. At 2 years, the groups did not differ for rates of institutionalisation.

Commentary
With the ageing of the population and restructuring of healthcare systems, greater expectations are and will be placed on informal caregivers to care for those with dementia. The study by Eloniemi-Sulkava et al makes an important contribution to our understanding of strategies that are effective in supporting informal caregivers of people with dementia. Although the results of most studies in this area have been inconclusive, a few have shown that training and counselling of family caregivers of individuals with dementia delayed admission to nursing homes.

The randomised controlled design is a strength of the study by Eloniemi-Sulkava et al; however, one must be cautious about generalising the results to countries other than Finland. It is interesting to note that in Finland, all individuals with dementia who require care are eligible for government payments independent of income. Limitations of the study include a sample size that may have been too small to detect a difference between the intervention and control groups and the absence of a cost analysis. Was the cost of the nurse with expertise in dementia care offset by the lower rates of institutionalisation during the first months? Further research (with larger sample sizes) is required to address these concerns.

Eloniemi-Sulkava et al recommend that the services of a dementia family care nurse coordinator be targeted to those with severe dementia. Home care programmes would benefit by having case managers with expertise in dementia care that would offer systematic and comprehensive support to individuals with dementia and their caregivers. As the authors point out, these case managers need continuous training and support and should have access to various healthcare professionals with expertise in dementia care.

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