Letters to the Editor

Commentary on “Outcome of Schizophrenia in Relation to Brain Abnormalities” by Staal et al.

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To the Editor:
We wish to congratulate Dr. Staal and colleagues on their efforts to review an important area of the literature (Staal et al. 1999). Their review would have been more complete if they had included the largest study on this topic to date, and one of the few in this area that both was truly prospective and took into account the effects of various possible confounders of brain-outcome relationships (for a review of these issues see van Os et al. 1997). We reported findings of a prospective followup study involving a cohort of 140 patients with functional psychoses of recent onset (the majority diagnosed with schizophrenia) (van Os et al. 1995). Patients had undergone computer tomography scanning at baseline and were subsequently followed up for an average of 46 months and assessed on six dimensions of course and outcome of illness. Analytical methods were used to adjust for possible confounding by age, gender, diagnosis, ethnic group, social class, head size, age at onset, and duration of illness. We found that left and right sylvian fissure volumes and, to a lesser extent, third ventricular volume predicted negative symptoms and unemployment over the course of the followup period, the latter association being mediated by poor cognitive functioning. There was a significant linear trend in risk over the sylvian fissure volume distribution in the cohort, and associations were especially evident in patients with schizophrenia. No associations were found with global illness severity, duration of hospitalization, homelessness, or affective symptomatology. There was no effect of lateral ventricular volume on any of the outcome measures.

References


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Reply to van Os et al.

Thank you, Dr. van Os, for bringing the 1995 article by van Os et al. to our attention. This important study describes the results of computer tomography and outcome assessments of 140 subjects with functional psychosis of recent onset. It was concluded that dimensions of the sulci and cerebral ventricles are a continuous risk factor for some measures of outcome in functional psychosis, which is an important finding.

However, our review was designed to specifically investigate outcome in schizophrenia and not the whole spectrum of schizophrenia-like disorders.

The main question regarding the article by van Os et al. is whether schizophrenia is a disorder that may be part of a continuous spectrum in the population or a specific disease. Our review was not designed to answer such a question. However, the hypothesis of a continuous spectrum of psychotic symptoms in the population certainly deserves attention.

References


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