Introduction to the Special Issue on Promoting Cognitive Health in Diverse Populations of Older Adults

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This special issue of The Gerontologist, “Promoting Cognitive Health in Diverse Populations of Older Adults,” is devoted to cognitive health, a major factor in ensuring quality of life and preserving independence. Cognitive health has been identified as a priority area for aging and public health through national efforts such as the National Institutes of Health’s Cognitive and Emotional Health Project (Hendrie et al., 2006) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Healthy Brain Initiative (Anderson & McConnell, 2007). This increased recognition also aligns with growing awareness of the significant health, social, and economic burden associated with cognitive impairments; rising concerns and fears about potential loss of cognitive functions with age; and increasing demands of family and professional caregivers. As the readers of The Gerontologist are well aware, the U.S. population as a whole is aging at an unprecedented rate, and with that change comes an increasing incidence of cognitive impairments, such as Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias (Administration on Aging, 2005). Alzheimer’s disease is now the sixth leading cause of death among U.S. adults aged 18 years or older and the fifth leading cause of death among those aged 65 years or older (Heron, Hoyert, Xu, Scott, & Tejada-Vera, 2008).

CDC’s national effort in this area supported the development of The Healthy Brain Initiative: A National Public Health Road Map for Maintaining Cognitive Health (CDC & Alzheimer’s Association, 2007). Released in late spring 2007, this publication sets forth a series of recommendations that are grounded in science, that emphasize primary prevention, that embrace community and population approaches, and that are committed to eliminating disparities. One of the top 10 recommendations is to “determine how diverse groups think about cognitive health and its associations with lifestyle factors.” The document also noted that developing useful programs requires understanding the public’s and practitioners’ views—but that such information was lacking.

The Healthy Aging Research Network (HAN), within CDC’s larger Prevention Research Centers Program and supported by CDC’s Healthy Aging Program, undertook formative research to help gain insights into the public’s and practitioners’ perceptions of cognitive health. The nine-member centers of the HAN collaborated on a series of focus groups designed to identify how diverse groups of older adults, caregivers, and health care providers understand cognitive health, and what approaches to health promotion and disease prevention may relate to maintaining and promoting cognitive health. Researchers in the HAN, along with the studies included in this special issue, are supported by a number of national agencies, including the National Institutes on Aging, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and CDC. Each HAN site
also worked with a local community advisory board and other groups that contributed to the project by donating space and publicizing the groups within the targeted populations.

As concluded in the Forum of this issue, few studies have systematically studied the public’s perceptions about cognitive health, and we lack information to understand perceptions across diverse demographic and cultural groups. The core set of articles in this special issue describe the results of this work. Specifically, these articles describe the purpose and methods used, along with the findings related to how the public describes cognition, what the public perceives about cognitive health and related risk factors, and how perceptions about cognition vary across diverse groups and regions. Additionally, the findings from several studies examining physical activity and cognition are reported, and their programmatic implications are described. The issue concludes with an editorial highlighting various themes that emerge from the articles.

Key risk factors have been identified (Hendrie et al., 2006), and we are learning a great deal about the effective methods for preventing chronic diseases. These methods will be vital because the case for prevention is mounting. The developments discussed here also underscore the need for consistent and comprehensible information about cognitive health. The challenge clearly lies in understanding our audiences, developing appropriate messages, identifying effective channels, and disseminating information for meaningful public consumption and action. The articles in this special issue provide a vital step in enhancing these objectives.

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References


