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A prospective study of criminal risk behaviours in frontotemporal dementia

Some people with dementia develop changes in behaviour, empathy, and decision-making. Clinicians have noticed that a number of people may also develop anti-social behaviours which can lead to inappropriate interactions with police or security guards. We refer to these behaviours as "criminal risk behaviours". To date, very few studies have systematically examined how common criminal risk behaviours are, and what subtypes of dementia are more likely to show criminal risk behaviours. Here, we developed a new questionnaire - the Misdemeanours and Transgressions Screener (MATS) - and asked carers to report what types of criminal risk behaviours they had noticed since the onset of dementia.

Two-hundred and seventeen carers completed the MATS: 77 carers of people with behavioural-variant frontotemporal dementia, 48 semantic dementia, 8 right-lateralised semantic dementia, 17 progressive nonfluent aphasia, 18 logopenic progressive aphasia, and 49 Alzheimer's disease.

Almost half of people who have been diagnosed with dementia had shown a criminal risk behaviour (41.9%). The most common behaviours were verbal abuse, financial/professional transgressions (e.g., gambling, online scams), traffic violations and inappropriate sexual behaviours (e.g., touching strangers, making unwanted sexual advances). People with behavioural-variant frontotemporal dementia and semantic dementia were most likely to show criminal risk behaviours.

Our study shows that criminal risk behaviours are much more common than previously thought. Work needs to be done to understand why these behaviours develop, as well as how to educate police and the criminal justice system about how to best manage criminal risk behaviours in people with dementia.

