

PSYCHOTIC DEPRESSION AND AGE

By

G. A. FOULDS, M.A., Ph.D.

Runwell Hospital, Wickford, Essex

INTRODUCTION

THE subject of the present communication arose from an incidental observation made during an attempt to establish a Symptom : Sign Inventory for use with all types of mental patients. For some time past all cases diagnosed by psychiatrists as suffering from depression, whether psychotic or neurotic, have been given this inventory. The observation made was that, within the group diagnosed as psychotic, those over 60 years of age did not appear from the inventory to have the same symptoms as those under 60.

PROCEDURE

Subjects

The subjects consisted of three groups of 20 each—neurotic depressives; psychotic depressives of 60 years of age and over; psychotic depressives of under 60 years. The groups contained 5, 5 and 3 men respectively.

Symptom : Sign Inventory

The Inventory consisted of 86 items which were intended to cover all neurotic and functional psychotic groups and to be very close to questions asked by the psychiatrist in his clinical interview. The Inventory has the advantage that every question is asked every patient in the same way. It has the disadvantage that it cannot take a longitudinal history. It was administered orally by different psychologists. A second copy of the Inventory was placed beside the patient so that she could refer to it if she wished. When any doubt existed about the patient's understanding of the question or about the correct classification of the response, illustrations of the behaviour in question were sought. It was explained that it was a standard list of questions that was being asked in order that nothing should be missed and that, in consequence, some of them would not be applicable to the particular patient.

RESULTS

There were 14 items in which the frequency of responses indicating the presence of the symptom or sign was greater by 25 per cent. in the psychotic depressive group under 60 years of age than in the neurotic depressive group. There were no items in which the frequency was greater by 25 per cent. in the neurotic group. These 14 items then constituted a scale for differentiating psychotic from neurotic depressives.

The mean score for psychotic depressives under 60 years was 6.85 (S.D. 2.56) and for neurotic depressives 2.35 (S.D. 2.94). The difference between these means was significant at the .1 per cent. level of confidence (t being 5.17). Of those diagnosed by psychiatrists as psychotic depressives, 18 (or 90 per cent.)

were so diagnosed by the Scale; of those diagnosed by psychiatrists as neurotic depressives 16 (or 80 per cent.) were so diagnosed by the scale.

A psychotic depressive under 60 years of age differs from a neurotic depressive mainly in feeling:

1. An unworthy person in her own eyes; (12-3).
2. A condemned person because of her sins; (12-3).
3. That people are talking about her and criticizing her because of things she has done wrong; (10-1).
4. Afraid to go out alone; (13-4).
5. She has said things that have injured others; (9-2).
6. So "worked-up" that she paces about wringing her hands; (11-4).
7. That she cannot communicate with others because she doesn't seem to be on the same "wave-length"; (10-3).
8. That there is something unusual about her body, like one side being different from the other, or meaning something different; (6-0).
9. That the future is pointless; (12-7).
10. That she might do away with herself because she is no longer able to cope with her difficulties; (8-3).
11. That other people regard her as very odd; (8-3).
12. That she is often bothered with pains over her heart, in her chest or in her back; (8-3).
13. So low in spirits that she just sits for hours on end; (12-7).
14. When she goes to bed that she wouldn't care if she never woke up again; (10-5).

It is noteworthy that the four "guilt" items are all high up on the list, which is arranged in order of discriminatory power. This confirms previous work by Foulds and Caine (1959).

A psychotic depressive over 60 years of age differs from a neurotic depressive mainly in feeling:

1. That the future is pointless; (14-7).
2. When she goes to bed that she wouldn't care if she never woke up again; (12-5).
3. She is troubled by waking in the early hours and being unable to get off to sleep again; (17-10).
4. Unable to understand what she reads, or what people say, as well as she used to do; (13-7).
5. Her hand shakes when she tries to do something; (14-9).
6. She has difficulty in getting off to sleep; (18-13).
7. The simplest task is too much of an effort; (15-10).
8. She has difficulty in keeping her balance; (8-3).
9. Other people regard her as very odd; (8-3).
10. An unworthy person in her own eyes; (8-3).
11. So "worked-up" that she paces about wringing her hands; (9-4).

Here only one "guilt" item appears and that in the lower half.

A psychotic depressive under 60 differs from a psychotic depressive over 60 mainly in feeling:

1. A condemned person because of her sins; (12-5).

2. Less often that her hand shakes when she tries to do something; (7-14).
 3. Less often that she is troubled by waking in the early hours and being unable to get off to sleep again; (10-17).
 4. Less often that she has difficulty in getting off to sleep; (12-18).
 5. Less often that she has difficulty in keeping her balance; (2-8).
 6. Afraid of being in a wide-open or an enclosed space; (9-3).
 7. She cannot communicate with others because she doesn't seem to be on the same "wave-length"; (10-4).
 8. People are talking about her and criticizing her because of things she has done wrong; (10-4).
 9. Less often that she suffers from palpitations and breathlessness; (5-10).
 10. Her thoughts rush ahead faster than she can express them; (10-5).
 11. Afraid to go out alone; (13-8).
 12. There is something unusual about her body, like one side being different from the other, or meaning something different; (6-1).
 13. She has said things which have injured others; (9-4).
- Here three of the four "guilt" items appear.

It may be noted that sleep disturbance, as assessed by the present method, is associated with age rather than psychotic depression. Thus, 50 per cent. of the younger psychotic group and of the neurotic group complain of early waking against 85 per cent. of the older psychotics. The figures for inability to get off to sleep are respectively 60 per cent., 65 per cent. and 90 per cent. and for diurnal variation (better in the evening) 30 per cent., 30 per cent. and 45 per cent.

Taking the same cutting score that gave maximal efficiency of discrimination between the younger psychotics and the neurotics, 13 (or 65 per cent.) of the over 60s were diagnosed by the Inventory as psychotics and 7 (or 35 per cent.) as neurotics.

The distribution for each of the three groups of scores on the 14 items which best differentiated between neurotics and the younger psychotics is shown in Figure 1.

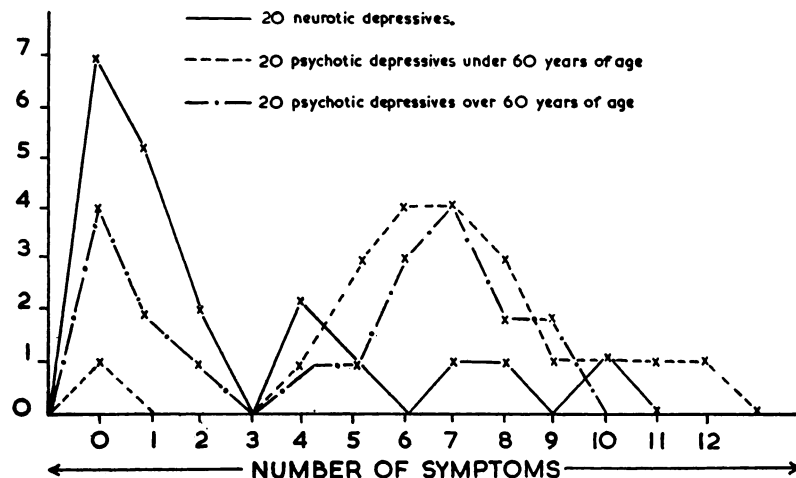


FIG. 1.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the Symptom : Sign Inventory is rather successful in confirming the psychiatric diagnosis in the case of neurotic depressives and of psychotic depressives under 60 years of age, it seems reasonable to conclude that a number of patients over 60 years of age who are diagnosed by psychiatrists as psychotic depressives do not have the same symptomatology as those under 60 years of age who are diagnosed as psychotic. It seems possible from the bimodal curve of the older "psychotic" depressives, that neurotic depression may be rather commoner among the over 60s than is sometimes thought and that this possible fact may be obscured by a tendency for psychiatrists to smuggle in age as a sign of psychosis.

It may be argued that some psychotic depressives are unwilling to reveal their symptoms and that this may account for some at least of the 7 cases in the over 60 group who appeared from the Inventory to be neurotic. It would, of course, be rather curious if this reticence were so much commoner in those over than in those under 60 years of age. One may take the admission of 10 or more symptoms, apart from the 14 "psychotic depressive" items, as suggestive evidence against the "reticence hypothesis". The following are the frequencies in the various groups: psychotic depressives under 60 years, 18 (or 90 per cent.); neurotic depressives, 11 (or 55 per cent.); psychotic depressives over 60 years, who appeared psychotic on the Inventory, 11 (or 85 per cent.); psychotic depressives over 60 years, who appeared neurotic on the Inventory, 5 (or 71 per cent.). From this evidence it would seem unlikely, therefore, that reticence accounts adequately for this group of low scorers (although it almost certainly did for one case).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. R. Ström-Olsen for permission to publish, Mr. G. Irving for administering most of the Inventories, and Dr. A. A. Robin for his valuable comments.

REFERENCE

1. FOULDS, G. A., and CAINE, T. M., *J. Ment. Sci.*, 1959, **105**, 438.