

Wandering and twilight in a female psychogeriatric population

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With the move towards community care, the problem of wandering behaviour in psychogeriatric patients may pose a barrier to their placement in residential homes. The prevailing wisdom that this behaviour increased around twilight was looked at by Evans (1983) whose study showed increased restlessness in the late afternoon in a nursing home population. Cohen-Mansfield *et al* (1989), however, did not find any clear pattern of behaviour related to sundown. This study examines only wandering behaviour and controls for seasonal change in twilight times.

The study

We had access to approximately 2,500 observations of instances of wandering in a female in-patient psychogeriatric population which we used to search for associations between wandering and twilight. Patients were all over 65 years of age and had been selected for some form of disruptive behaviour that had not yielded to the routine exhibition of psychotropic drugs. Each patient was observed by a nurse over 36 hours and her behaviour noted every 15 minutes on a check list of behaviours which included wandering, defined as 'aimless walking'. The observations on small groups of patients were made over three years and twilight obviously varied over the months. This variation was controlled by selecting those observations taken at "sunset times" given in *Whittaker's Almanack*. After establishing "sunset", a three hour period was identified:

- hour 1 = 1 hour before the twilight hour
- hour 2 = 1/2 hour either side of sunset, the twilight hour
- hour 3 = 1 hour after the twilight hour.

We defined twilight wanderers (TW) as patients who wandered in hour 2, or hours 2 plus 3, but not

hour 1. Non twilight wanderers (NTW) were defined as those who wandered in hours 1, or 1 plus 3, but not 2. Non wanderers (NW) were also noted.

Findings

The total number of observations was 277 in the specified hours: TW 22; NTW 116; and NW 139. Percentage TW/NTW = $22/116 \times 100/1 = 19\%$. Percentage TW/all wanderings = $22/22 + 116 \times 100/1 = 16\%$.

Comment

Wandering behaviour is common in this population and it would be easy for the casual observer to make a link between such activity and twilight. Cohen-Mansfield *et al* (1989) found little correlation between twilight and agitated behaviour in a nursing home setting and our results concur with theirs.

We have shown, by controlling for sundown times, that in this group of female psychogeriatric patients wandering behaviour is not a twilight phenomenon. Plotting the total number of observations (2,500) by time of occurrence, and not controlling for sundown times, produces no suggestion of an increase of wandering at any time of the day, although there is a clear decrease during the sleeping hours.

References

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