

Taking risks without knowing it - Ethical and legal impact of self-perception disorders in Alzheimer's disease

Thomas Tannou (Institut Universitaire de Gériatrie de Montréal, CIUSS Centre-Sud de l'Île de Montréal)

Take a moment to reflect on the last risk you took. If a close friend or family member had known, they might have urged caution. Yet, it's likely you would have passionately defended your choice, underscoring the significance of calculated risks to our sense of freedom, autonomy, and identity. However, the onset of Alzheimer's disease can bring about anosognosia, a condition marked by diminished self-awareness that leads to potentially unsafe decisions due to the overestimation of one's capabilities (1). This phenomenon poses a dilemma: how to balance respect for individual autonomy with the imperative of ensuring safety and care. As anosognosia progresses, affected individuals may not only overestimate their functional abilities but also resist interventions designed to support and care for them, increasing the risk of caregiver burnout and the possibility of unwanted institutionalization (2,3). The challenge extends to the realm of cognitive assessment. Tools like neurofunctional imaging (e.g., fMRI) aim to objectively evaluate decision-making capacity, to support legal guardianship but often fall short in accounting for anosognosia, highlighting a critical gap in our approach to care (4). Addressing this gap requires a shift in perspective. Beyond the narrow focus on objective cognitive assessments and biomarkers, there is a profound need to prioritize what truly matters to aging individuals. This entails fostering early self-awareness and advocating for a compassionate society that not only acknowledges but also respects the right to take risks. We must also recognize our moral responsibilities when supporting risk-taking, aiming to mitigate the stigmatization of cognitive disorders. A care plan that respects individual vulnerabilities can help navigate the complexities of cognitive decline, ensuring risks are aligned with what matters most to aging individuals (5). In doing so, accepting risks becomes an integral part of a person-centered approach to life, celebrating autonomy while navigating the complexities of cognitive decline.

References:

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