Prevalence of Depression Among the Elderly Chinese in Canada

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Depression is one of the most common mental health problems among seniors. In Canada, it affects almost 10% of the general elderly population.¹ However, despite the cultural diversity in the Canadian elderly population, very little effort has been made to examine the mental health status and concerns of ethnic elderly groups. The 1996 census information of Statistics Canada suggests that Chinese constitute the largest single visible minority group in Canada as well as in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Newfoundland. With a total population of 860,150, they account for 27% of the visible minority population in 1996. Nevertheless, no published research on depression in the elderly Chinese population in Canada is available.

Previous research studies on depression among elderly Chinese were mainly done in other countries: in Hong Kong, 29% of the elderly men and 41% of the elderly women were found to be moderately to severely depressed;² in Taiwan, the prevalence rate of depression of elderly Chinese is 35%;³ in Shanghai, China, 50%;⁴ in Singapore, 5%;⁵ and in the Liverpool area of the United Kingdom, 13% (CI 6-23%).⁶ In a mid-western city in the United States, one in five (20%) elderly Chinese are moderately depressed and 11% have severe depression symptoms.⁷ In another study in Manhattan, New York, 16% of the elderly Chinese are mildly depressed and 2% are moderately to severely depressed.⁸

In Canada, only a few research studies have investigated issues faced by elderly Chinese. While most of these studies have examined life satisfaction,⁹ social support,¹⁰ health status,^{11,12} service utilization,¹¹ and psychological and social adjustment,^{12,13} depression in the elderly Chinese population has never been formally assessed. The aim of this study is to measure the prevalence of depression in a random sample of elderly Chinese in a major Canadian urban centre. The findings are significant to mental health practitioners and service providers, who seek to understand the mental health status and needs of this ethnic elderly group.

METHODS

The participants of this research were Chinese elderly persons, 65 years and older, who were randomly selected from the membership list of the Chinese senior centre in Calgary. The sample is representative since the membership of 3,473 persons accounts for more than 77% of the estimated total of the elderly Chinese population in the city.

Telephone interviews in October 1998 were used to collect the data. Depression was measured by a Chinese version of the 15-item Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS)¹⁴ included in the structured survey. This scale was translated and adapted from the 15-item English GDS.¹⁵ The cultural appropriateness, validity, and reliability of this scale for use with Chinese elderly persons in North America have been established.¹⁴ Participants were asked to answer either "yes" or "no" to each of the 15 questions in the scale. Scores were assigned to those who indicated positive answers to the depressive symptoms. Participants who scored between 5 and 9 were classified as mildly depressed,

and those who scored between 10 and 15, moderately to severely depressed. The scale was administered to the participants by trained interviewers, in languages or dialects spoken by the participants. While most of the telephone interviews were conducted in Cantonese (94%), a few were in Mandarin (3%) and Toishan (3%). Basic demographic data including age, gender, marital status, education level, language and dialect spoken, place of origin, length of residency in Canada, and living arrangement, were also collected in the survey.

RESULTS

In this paper, descriptive findings of the depression symptoms reported by the participants are reported. Table I presents their demographic profile. Compared with the sample characteristics of the elderly Chinese in another recent study in Greater Vancouver and Victoria,¹⁶ the participants in this study were younger in age, newer to Canada, less educated, and less able to speak English. These characteristics reflect the typical differences between the recent elderly Chinese immigrants to Calgary and the earlier ones to Vancouver and Victoria.

A mean GDS score of 3.15 (SD=3.60, Mdn=2.0) was reported. Using the cutoff scores suggested by the original authors of the scale, 9.4% of the elderly Chinese were mildly depressed, and 11.5% were moderately to severely depressed. Female seniors reported significantly higher levels of depression than their male counterparts (3.95 vs 2.03; $t = 2.66$, $p < 0.01$). Among the women, 28.8% reported a mild to severe level of depression; the prevalence rate for men, however, was only 10%. The results for each of the GDS items are presented in Table II.

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The two most common depressive symptoms, reported by almost half of the Chinese elderly persons, are “dropped many ... activities and interests” and “having more problems with memory.” Other important depressive symptoms, reported by approximately a quarter of the participants, include “afraid that something bad is going to happen,” “feel pretty worthless,” and “think that most people are better off.” Finally, more women than men reported depressive symptoms of “afraid that something bad is going to happen,” “feel (un)happy most of the time,” “frequently worry about the future,” and “frequently get upset over little things.”

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of depressive symptoms, as reported by the Chinese elderly persons in this study, is twice that of the estimated prevalence among the general elderly population in Canada.¹ This finding suggests that this population group is vulnerable to mental health issues. Since few elderly Chinese are able to speak English, they are in a disadvantaged position in terms of access to mental health services. Service providers have to be more sensitive to the cultural needs of this client group and to make the services more accessible to them.

Depression is more serious among elderly Chinese women than men. Although no comparable data are available in Canada, studies in the United States have reported that elderly Chinese women have a suicide rate that is 10 times that of older Caucasian women.¹⁷ Since research findings have generally shown a strong link between depression and suicide, particularly among older adults,¹⁷ the need for culturally appropriate mental health services for this at-risk population is pressing.

Overall, this study has identified a unique mental health pattern of Chinese elders. These findings would not have been made if the study had been conducted so that this ethnic group was grouped within the general population. Further, the findings also suggest the need for attention and research in a similar manner to examine mental health issues of other ethnically diverse elders in Canada.

TABLE I
Demographic Backgrounds of the Participants (N=96)

	Mean	SD	N	%
Sex				
Female			56	58.3
Male			40	41.7
Age (ranged from 65 to 88)	71.7	5.05		
Marital Status				
Married			64	66.7
Widowed			28	29.2
Divorced/Separated			4	4.2
Education Level				
No Formal Education			3	3.1
Primary/Elementary School			46	47.9
High School			26	27.1
College or University			8	8.3
Language and Dialect				
English			16	16.7
Cantonese			93	96.9
Mandarin			22	22.9
Toishan			17	17.7
Vietnamese			12	12.5
Place of Origin				
Hong Kong			51	53.1
Mainland China			23	24.0
Vietnam			19	19.8
Other			3	3.1
Length of Residency in Canada	14.16	8.85		
Living Arrangement				
With Children			25	26.0
With Spouse			21	21.9
With Spouse & Children			33	34.4
Living Alone			17	17.7

TABLE II
Depressive Symptoms of the Chinese Elderly Persons (N = 96)

GDS Items	Women (n=56)		Men (n=40)		Total (N=96)	
	%	n	%	n	%	N
Basically satisfied with life	96.4	54	97.5	39	96.9	93
Dropped many of your activities and interests	55.4	31	45.0	18	51.0	49
Feel that life is empty	14.3	8	5.0	2	10.4	10
Often get bored	25.0	14	10.0	4	18.8	18
In good pretty worthless	76.8	43	87.5	35	81.3	78
Afraid that something bad is going to happen*	33.9	19	10.0	4	24.0	23
Feel happy most of the time*	71.4	40	95.0	38	81.3	78
Often get restless and fidgety	21.4	12	10.0	4	16.7	16
Frequently worry about the future*	25.0	14	5.0	2	16.7	16
Feel having more problems with memory than most	50.0	28	45.0	18	47.9	46
Feel downhearted and blue	19.6	11	7.5	3	14.6	14
Feel pretty worthless	28.6	16	15.0	6	22.9	22
Think that most people are better off	26.8	15	15.0	6	21.9	21
Frequently get upset over little things*	26.8	15	7.5	3	18.8	18
Frequently feel like crying	12.5	7	7.5	3	10.4	10

* Significantly different between women and men.

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