THE TIME COURSE OF SEMANTIC AND EPISODIC MEMORY DECLINE IN MILD COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT AND EARLY ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

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Introduction: Alzheimer's disease (AD) is characterized by a gradual loss of cognitive function of which the primary and initial deficit is one of episodic memory.

Aims: We report the time course of semantic memory decline relative to episodic memory decline in patients with mild cognitive impairment (MCI; n=83) and early AD (n=53).

Methods: A retrospective longitudinal study of cases from the database of a tertiary care Memory Clinic. Patients underwent repeated neuropsychological evaluations over 4 years. The episodic memory tests were the Logical Memory subtests of the Wechsler Memory Scale - III and the Rey Auditory-Verbal Learning Test (RVLT). The semantic memory tests were Word fluency for animals (Fluency) and the Boston Naming Test (BNT).

Results: For subjects with MCI who progressed to AD (56% of MCI), there was a sharp drop in both episodic and semantic memory scores in the year leading up to diagnosis followed by a leveling off in scores for about one year after. By two years post-diagnosis, there was a measurable decline similar in size for both types of memory. Semantic memory was mildly impaired, but stable, for up to four years in some persons with MCI. During this time, episodic memory scores were also stable in these patients. Patients who were diagnosed with AD at a younger age (less than 78 years; median split) performed relatively better on semantic memory tasks than older patients.

Conclusion: In MCI and early AD, semantic and episodic memory either remain stable together or decline at the same rate.