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The Science of Memory Loss: Insights into Alzheimer's Disease

Agnieszka Starzyk

Medical University of Warsaw

Żwirki i Wigury 61, 02-091 Warsaw, Poland

astarz.st@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8696-4187

Piotr Charzewski

Kozminski University

Jagiellońska 57, 03-301 Warsaw, Poland

charzewskip@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5170-3899

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Alzheimer's disease is the leading cause of dementia and is rapidly emerging as one of the most costly, fatal, and burdensome diseases of the 21st century. Since the publication of the 2016 Seminar, significant advancements have been made in understanding the disease's underlying pathology, identifying multiple causative and protective genetic factors, developing novel blood-based and imaging biomarkers, and observing early indications of positive effects from disease-modifying treatments and lifestyle interventions. This updated Seminar aims to provide readers with a comprehensive and current overview of the evolving field of Alzheimer's disease.

Materials and Methods: This review compiles data from recent studies on the pathogenesis, diagnostics, and treatment of Alzheimer's Disease (AD), sourced through systematic searches of databases like PubMed and Embase. Articles were selected based on relevance to biomarkers, imaging techniques, therapeutic strategies, and mechanisms of neurodegeneration. Key diagnostic approaches reviewed include cerebrospinal fluid assays for amyloid and tau markers, immunohistochemical techniques for inflammatory mediators, and neuroimaging modalities such as PET and MRI. Therapeutic interventions evaluated encompass approved pharmacological treatments, emerging therapies like immunotherapy and gene editing, and multi-domain prevention strategies. Insights were synthesized to present a concise, evidence-based overview of current advancements and future directions in AD research.

Results: The reviewed studies highlight significant advancements in understanding Alzheimer's Disease (AD). Biomarker research has identified cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) markers, including reduced Aβ42 and elevated phosphorylated tau, as reliable diagnostic tools, while imaging techniques like PET and MRI have improved early detection and disease staging. Current pharmacological treatments, such as cholinesterase inhibitors and NMDA receptor antagonists, provide modest symptomatic relief but do not modify disease progression. Emerging therapies targeting amyloid and tau proteins, including monoclonal antibodies and gene editing, show promise but face challenges in efficacy and safety. Neuroinflammation was consistently identified as a critical contributor to AD pathology, with cytokines like IL-1β and TNF-α playing central roles. Lifestyle interventions and multidomain prevention strategies demonstrated potential for reducing cognitive decline in at-risk populations. Despite progress, the development of effective disease-modifying therapies remains a pressing challenge.

Conclusions: The reviews collectively emphasize the multifactorial nature of Alzheimer's Disease (AD) and the critical need for early and accurate diagnostic tools. Biomarkers and

imaging technologies, such as PET scans and cerebrospinal fluid assays, have revolutionized the early detection of AD, enabling interventions during preclinical stages. Current treatments, including cholinesterase inhibitors and NMDA receptor antagonists, offer symptomatic relief but lack the ability to halt disease progression. Emerging therapies targeting amyloid and tau proteins, along with gene editing and immunotherapy, demonstrate potential but require further validation to address efficacy and safety concerns. Lifestyle modifications and multidomain prevention strategies show promise in mitigating cognitive decline and reducing disease risk. Continued advancements in biomarker research, therapeutic innovation, and personalized medicine are essential for transforming AD management and improving patient outcomes.
Keywords: Alzheimer's Disease (AD), Biomarkers, Neuroinflammation, Amyloid Beta (Aβ), Tau protein

INTRODUCTION

Alzheimer's disease (AD), the leading cause of dementia, is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that significantly impacts memory, cognition, language, and problem-solving abilities. Dementia prevalence increases with age, affecting approximately 5–8% of individuals over 65 and rising to 25–50% in those over 85. [1] According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of people living with dementia globally is expected to triple by 2050, up from an estimated 35.6 million in 2010. [3] Women are disproportionately affected, with AD prevalence 19–29% higher than in men. Countries such as China, the USA, India, and Brazil lead in the number of dementia cases, with over 1 million individuals affected in each as of 2010. [2,5]

The pathology of AD is characterized by the accumulation of amyloid-beta (Aβ) plaques and neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs), composed of hyperphosphorylated tau proteins, which disrupt synaptic function and lead to neuronal death. Aβ plaques are formed from amyloid precursor protein (APP), sequentially cleaved by β-secretase (BACE1) and γ-secretase to produce isoforms such as Aβ1-40 and Aβ1-42. [6-8] While Aβ1-40 is soluble, Aβ1-42 aggregates more readily, contributing to toxic plaque formation. Genetic mutations in APP, presenilin 1 (PS1), presenilin 2 (PS2), and APOE4, along with altered neuropeptide levels, are implicated in this

process. [9, 10, 25] Despite its prominence, the amyloid hypothesis is increasingly scrutinized as drugs targeting amyloid plaque formation have failed to reverse or halt cognitive decline, suggesting the need to explore alternative therapeutic targets such as tau proteins, inflammation, and oxidative stress. [3, 11, 16]

Since the 2016 Seminar on AD, significant progress has been made in understanding its pathology, identifying genetic risk and protective factors, and developing novel biomarkers for early detection and monitoring, including blood-based and imaging tools.[12-14] Early signals of efficacy from disease-modifying treatments and lifestyle interventions offer cautious optimism, but challenges remain in translating these findings into meaningful clinical outcomes. [15]

This updated Seminar provides a comprehensive review of the latest developments in Alzheimer's research. It highlights the need for a shift toward innovative therapies targeting both amyloid and non-amyloid pathways and underscores the urgency of addressing the global burden of this growing health crisis through improved prevention, diagnosis, and treatment strategies. [17, 18]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review synthesizes insights from recent advancements in Alzheimer's Disease (AD) research, drawing from systematic searches in scientific databases such as PubMed and Embase. Articles published between 2016 and 2023 were included based on their focus on biomarkers, imaging technologies, therapeutic interventions, and the molecular mechanisms underlying AD. [1-4, 6] The search strategy incorporated specific keywords such as "Alzheimer's Disease," "biomarkers," "neuroinflammation," "amyloid beta," "tau protein," and "therapeutics." Both foundational studies and the latest experimental research were considered.

Diagnostic methodologies evaluated include cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) assays for amyloid-beta (Aβ42) and phosphorylated tau (p-tau), immunohistochemical techniques for inflammatory markers, and advanced neuroimaging modalities like positron emission tomography (PET) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). [7, 9, 14] These tools were analyzed for their effectiveness in early detection, disease staging, and monitoring of treatment responses. [19, 20]

Therapeutic approaches reviewed encompassed FDA-approved drugs, such as cholinesterase inhibitors (e.g., donepezil) and NMDA receptor antagonists (e.g., memantine), as well as

emerging disease-modifying therapies targeting amyloid and tau proteins through monoclonal antibodies and gene editing. [21, 22] Additionally, lifestyle interventions and multidomain prevention strategies, including cognitive training, diet, and physical activity, were assessed for their potential to mitigate cognitive decline. [5, 23]

Data synthesis involved integrating findings from clinical trials, meta-analyses, and observational studies to present a comprehensive overview of current challenges and opportunities in AD research. [26, 27] This methodological approach ensures a balanced understanding of the complex interplay between biomarkers, therapeutic innovations, and disease progression in Alzheimer's Disease.

RESULTS

The treatment and management of Alzheimer's Disease (AD) are of critical importance due to its increasing prevalence and devastating impact on individuals and healthcare systems. [1,2] Recent advances in research have shed light on both the underlying mechanisms and potential interventions, though significant challenges remain. Biomarker research has played a pivotal role in improving diagnostic accuracy, with cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) assays showing decreased Aβ42 and elevated phosphorylated tau (p-tau) levels as reliable indicators of disease progression. [13, 18] Imaging modalities such as positron emission tomography (PET) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) have further enhanced diagnostic capabilities by visualizing amyloid plaques, tau pathology, and neurodegeneration, enabling early detection at preclinical and mild cognitive impairment (MCI) stages. [9, 28] This integration of biomarkers and imaging is essential for timely intervention.

Tau proteins, alongside amyloid-beta, are central to the pathology of AD. The hyperphosphorylation of tau leads to the formation of neurofibrillary tangles, which disrupt microtubule stability and impair intracellular transport. These tangles contribute directly to synaptic dysfunction and neuronal death. Research has highlighted the interplay between amyloid-beta and tau, with amyloid-beta aggregation often preceding tau hyperphosphorylation and exacerbating its toxic effects. [22, 29, 30] Targeting tau pathology is emerging as a key focus in therapeutic development, with novel approaches aiming to inhibit tau aggregation, reduce phosphorylation, or enhance clearance mechanisms. These efforts aim to mitigate neuronal damage and slow cognitive decline, yet many therapies are still in early phases of investigation. [20, 26]

Current pharmacological treatments for Alzheimer's Disease (AD) are primarily focused on managing symptoms rather than halting or reversing the underlying neurodegenerative processes. Cholinesterase inhibitors, such as donepezil, rivastigmine, and galantamine, aim to enhance cholinergic neurotransmission by preventing the breakdown of acetylcholine, thereby improving communication between neurons. These medications provide modest benefits in cognition, memory, and overall daily functioning, particularly in patients with mild to moderate AD. Similarly, memantine, an NMDA receptor antagonist, works by modulating glutamatergic neurotransmission, which can become dysregulated in AD, leading to excitotoxicity. Memantine is often prescribed for moderate to severe AD and can help stabilize cognitive function and improve behavioral symptoms. Despite their widespread use, these drugs do not address the underlying disease mechanisms and offer only symptomatic relief, with limited efficacy in preventing disease progression. [8, 14]

In contrast, disease-modifying therapies are designed to target the pathological hallmarks of AD, such as amyloid-beta plaques and tau tangles. These therapies aim to slow or halt disease progression by intervening in the molecular processes driving neurodegeneration. Monoclonal antibodies, including aducanumab, have shown potential in reducing amyloid-beta plaque burden by promoting its clearance through the immune system. However, the clinical efficacy of aducanumab and similar therapies in improving cognitive outcomes remains uncertain, with many trials failing to demonstrate significant benefits beyond biomarker changes. Furthermore, the use of amyloid-targeting therapies has been associated with adverse events, including amyloid-related imaging abnormalities (ARIA), which encompass cerebral edema and microhemorrhages. These safety concerns, combined with high costs and accessibility challenges, underscore the need for continued innovation in developing safe and effective treatments. [12, 20]

Efforts are also underway to develop tau-targeting therapies, which aim to prevent tau hyperphosphorylation, aggregation, and the formation of neurofibrillary tangles. These approaches, alongside strategies targeting inflammation and oxidative stress, represent promising avenues for future disease-modifying interventions. While these therapies remain in experimental phases, they highlight the shift in AD research toward addressing the root causes of neurodegeneration rather than merely alleviating symptoms.

Neuroinflammation has been consistently identified as a significant driver of AD pathology. Pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-1β and TNF-α, along with the activation of microglia and astrocytes, perpetuate inflammatory responses that exacerbate amyloid and tau pathologies. These inflammatory mechanisms are further amplified by oxidative stress and mitochondrial dysfunction, contributing to neuronal damage and the progression of the disease. Understanding these pathways has informed the development of anti-inflammatory therapies, though their clinical application remains in nascent stages. [1, 20]

Lifestyle interventions, including physical activity, cognitive training, and dietary modifications, have shown promise in reducing the risk of cognitive decline and slowing the progression of dementia. Multidomain prevention strategies, which integrate these elements, have been particularly effective in at-risk populations. These findings underscore the potential of non-pharmacological approaches as complementary strategies in the management of AD.

Despite these advances, the development of effective disease-modifying therapies remains a critical unmet need. Future research must address the complex interplay of amyloid, tau, neuroinflammation, and other contributing factors while advancing the integration of pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches. Progress in these areas offers the potential to transform the management of AD and improve outcomes for patients and caregivers. [26]

CONCLUSIONS

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) research has advanced significantly in diagnostic and therapeutic approaches, yet effective disease-modifying treatments remain a major challenge. Biomarkers such as reduced Aβ42 and elevated phosphorylated tau, alongside advanced imaging techniques like PET and MRI, enable early diagnosis and precise disease staging. Current treatments, including cholinesterase inhibitors and NMDA receptor antagonists, provide symptomatic relief but fail to alter disease progression. Emerging therapies targeting amyloid-beta and tau proteins show potential, though efficacy and safety issues persist. [13] Neuroinflammation, driven by cytokines and glial activation, is increasingly recognized as a central contributor to disease progression, presenting a promising target for future interventions. Lifestyle modifications, including physical activity, cognitive training, and dietary adjustments, also demonstrate potential in reducing cognitive decline and risk.

Clinicians should prioritize early diagnosis through biomarker and imaging technologies to facilitate timely interventions. Symptomatic management with cholinesterase inhibitors and memantine remains the cornerstone of treatment, but incorporating lifestyle interventions such as regular exercise, cognitive engagement, and a balanced diet can complement pharmacological approaches and improve patient outcomes. [28] Keeping abreast of emerging therapies targeting amyloid, tau, and neuroinflammatory pathways is crucial for integrating new advancements into clinical practice. Tailoring treatment plans to individual patient needs through a combination of pharmacological and non-pharmacological strategies is essential for optimizing care and enhancing quality of life.[1-3]

Author`s contribution:

Conceptualization: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Methodology: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Software: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Check: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Formal analysis: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Investigation: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Resources: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Data curation: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Writing-rough preparation: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Writing-review and editing: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Supervision: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski
Project administration: Agnieszka Starzyk, Piotr Charzewski

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