
Public Relations

Wayne State University provides statistical expertise in multi-site project to identify early signs of Alzheimer's in Latinos

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DETROIT – Wassim Tarraf, assistant professor at WSU's Institute of Gerontology, is a co-investigator and lead statistician on a \$5.67 million five-year study charting how mild cognitive impairment progresses to Alzheimer's in Latinos. The lead principal investigator of this National Institute on Aging grant (# AG048642) is Hector Gonzalez, a colleague of Tarraf's at WSU and now an associate professor at Michigan State University. The project will recruit 6,600 Latinos, age 52 and up, from 16,000 participants in the Hispanic Community Health Study / Study of Latinos begun in 2011.

"This study complements existing large data studies of non-Latino populations," Tarraf said. The questions and approach are purposely similar so the results can be compared. "In combination, we will get a large view of the cognitive changes in many racial and ethnic groups in the US as they age."

By 2050 about one-third of the US population will be of Latino or Hispanic origin, so understanding the cognitive challenges to older adults in this group is a public health priority. Researchers are especially interested in understanding when mild cognitive impairment, or MCI, progresses to Alzheimer's or other dementia. A major goal is to differentiate normal aging from MCI heralded by subtle changes in memory, language, thinking and judgment that, while noticeable, seldom impair day-to-day activity.

Data on cardiovascular and genetic risk factors has previously been collected on the participants. The next phase of the study will coalesce cultural, genetic, and other biomarkers that could be precursors to dementia. Recruits will complete a more extensive battery of neurocognitive tests to compare against tests done in the original study. Based on this, researchers hope to classify individuals as having MCI and then link sociocultural, biological and genetic factors to its prevalence.

"This work won't get us to the etiology of cognitive impairment or dementia, but will be a well-positioned stepping stone to future studies," Tarraf said. "If we can progress toward following these people over a longer period, with extensive brain imaging or neurological exams, then we might learn how cognitive impairment develops."

Tarraf is a methodologist with expertise in large complex survey data analyses and advanced statistical modeling. He will assist in supervising data collection, help to integrate the genetics data with neurocognitive data, and be the lead statistical analyst for reports and publications. Scientists will collect data from New York, Illinois, Florida and California. "This is truly interdisciplinary; senior experts from multiple fields across the country are working together," Tarraf said. "It is rewarding to work with and learn from these great scientists. I'm grateful to be able to contribute."

The Institute of Gerontology researches aging, educates trainees in gerontology, and presents programs on aging issues relevant to professionals, caregivers and older adults in the community (www.iog.wayne.edu). The Institute is part of the Division of Research at Wayne State University, one of the nation's preeminent public research institutions in an urban setting. For more information, visit <http://www.research.wayne.edu>.

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