Observation of Symptoms and Challenges in Medication Use Among Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

A Psychologist's Observations and Personal Experience
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Individuals with intellectual disabilities face a markedly higher risk of delayed diagnosis in health-related conditions compared to the general population, primarily due to communication difficulties. For example, studies on cancer cases have reported that cancer-related mortality among individuals with intellectual disabilities is approximately 50% higher than in the non-disabled population. Moreover, nearly half of these individuals are already diagnosed at an advanced stage (Stage IV) at the time of cancer detection. A study conducted in the United Kingdom also found that more than 40% of patients with intellectual disabilities who died from colorectal cancer had passed away before reaching the recommended screening age.

These striking figures clearly demonstrate how the inability to recognize symptoms early, combined with structural deficiencies in the healthcare system, can lead to severe consequences. Delayed diagnosis is often rooted in communication barriers and biased attitudes. Because of difficulties in self-expression, healthcare staff may underestimate or overlook the symptoms of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The literature refers to this as **"diagnostic overshadowing,"** in which healthcare professionals mistakenly attribute physical symptoms to the person's disability and fail to investigate possible biological causes. Numerous case reports and studies have documented the delayed detection of health problems among this population.

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1. Introduction

As a psychologist working with individuals with intellectual disabilities, one of the most common challenges I encounter in daily practice is their difficulty in adequately expressing health-related symptoms. This situation particularly complicates the early detection and regular monitoring of serious conditions such as cancer.

As in many other illnesses, early diagnosis is crucial for improving cancer treatment outcomes. However, for individuals who struggle with self-expression, symptom recognition often depends largely on the active observation and accurate interpretation of healthcare staff.

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2. Commonly Observed Issues

- **Communication Difficulties:** Individuals often struggle to verbally describe pain, discomfort, or other symptoms.
- **Masking Effect of Chronic Conditions:** Many have pre-existing chronic illnesses. New symptoms are frequently attributed to these conditions, which may delay diagnosis.
- **Rapid and Superficial Interventions:** Symptom-suppressing medications, such as painkillers, are often administered without thoroughly investigating the underlying cause.
- **Lack of Comprehensive Evaluation:** Failing to explore the source of physical complaints through multidisciplinary assessments can result in serious conditions being overlooked.

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3. Case Example: Observation from the Institution

One of the individuals with special needs receiving care in our institution frequently complained of abdominal pain. However, because of his history of chronic gastrointestinal problems, these complaints were consistently attributed to his existing condition. Although painkillers provided temporary relief, neither prolonged observation nor further diagnostic tests were conducted. This approach may have delayed the early detection of a potentially serious health problem.

This case demonstrates how relying solely on medical history when evaluating symptoms can be a risky practice.

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4. My Personal Experience: Thyroid Cancer Diagnosis

In addition to my professional observations, my own health experience has provided me with a different perspective. I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer some time ago.

- The disease was at an early stage, and my symptoms were very mild.
- The signs could easily have been mistaken for stress-related physical reactions.
- Despite consulting multiple physicians, establishing a diagnosis was difficult.
- Ultimately, a specialist at a private hospital made the correct diagnosis.

Thanks to this early diagnosis, my treatment began promptly, the process was smoother, and I am now healthy.
Had I been unable to express myself or if my symptoms had been dismissed, my diagnosis would likely have been delayed significantly—complicating my treatment process.

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5. Key Insights and Recommendations

- **Standardized Observation Protocols:** Establish structured symptom assessment steps before administering medications to individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves.
- **Multidisciplinary Approach:** Ensure psychologists, nurses, physicians, and care staff make joint decisions through regular case meetings.
- **Training and Awareness:** Provide staff with regular training on early warning signs of cancer.
- **Individual Health Records:** Maintain personal observation forms documenting each individual's medical history and current symptoms.
- **Role of Psychologists:** Evaluate behavioral and emotional changes as potential early indicators of physical problems.

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6. Conclusion

Recognizing health problems early in individuals with intellectual disabilities is not only a medical duty but also an ethical responsibility. Missing symptoms can lead to delayed diagnoses and more complex, burdensome treatment processes. Therefore, both symptom monitoring and medication use must be systematized.

In particular, individuals with special needs residing in **institutional care or rehabilitation facilities** are more vulnerable in terms of access to healthcare, making it essential that **all medications—including painkillers—be administered under a clear protocol and monitoring framework.** Unstructured or routine use of medication may suppress emerging symptoms, thereby delaying the diagnosis of underlying serious illnesses. This increases the risk of mismanagement and eliminates opportunities for early intervention.

Healthcare staff working in such institutions must therefore integrate medication administration into systematic observation processes and always investigate the underlying cause of symptoms.

🔷 **Overlooking minor symptoms can lead to major consequences.**
🔷 **Comprehensive, multidimensional assessments are essential for early diagnosis.**
🔷 **A systematic approach to health—including controlled medication use—is crucial for ensuring the well-being of individuals with special needs.**