Mild cognitive impairment in clinical care
A survey of American Academy of Neurology members

ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess how neurologists view mild cognitive impairment (MCI) as a clinical diagnosis and how they treat patients with mild cognitive symptoms.

Methods: Members of the American Academy of Neurology with an aging, dementia, or behavioral neurology practice focus were surveyed by self-administered questionnaire.

Results: Survey respondents were 420 providers (response rate 48%), and 88% reported at least monthly encounters with patients experiencing mild cognitive symptoms. Most respondents recognize MCI as a clinical diagnosis (90%) and use its diagnostic code for billing purposes (70%). When seeing these patients, most respondents routinely provide counseling on physical (78%) and mental exercise (75%) and communicate about dementia risk (63%); fewer provide information on support services (27%) or a written summary of findings (15%). Most (70%) prescribe cholinesterase inhibitors at least sometimes for this population, with memantine (39%) and other agents (e.g., vitamin E) prescribed less frequently. Respondents endorsed several benefits of a diagnosis of MCI: 1) involving the patient in planning for the future (87%); 2) motivating risk reduction activities (85%); 3) helping with financial planning (72%); and 4) prescribing medications (65%). Some respondents noted drawbacks, including 1) too difficult to diagnose (23%); 2) better described as early Alzheimer disease (21%); and 3) diagnosis can cause unnecessary worry (20%).

Conclusions: Patients with mild cognitive symptoms are commonly seen by neurologists, who view MCI as a useful diagnostic category. Information and treatments provided to patients with MCI vary significantly, suggesting a need for practice guidelines and further research on clinical decision-making with this population.

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GLOSSARY

AAMI = age-associated memory impairment; AAN = American Academy of Neurology; AD = Alzheimer disease; CIND = cognitive impairment, no dementia; DSM-V = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition; MCI = mild cognitive impairment; NOS = not otherwise specified.

Extensive clinical research has focused on the often transitional state between normal cognitive aging and dementia, often characterized as mild cognitive impairment (MCI).1,2 Persons with MCI are at high risk of developing Alzheimer disease (AD), with annual rates of progression from the amnestic form of MCI to clinical AD estimated at approximately 10%–15%.3 Over time, MCI has moved from research into clinical practice. The American Academy of Neurology (AAN) and the European Consortium on Alzheimer’s Disease have published practice guidelines for MCI,4,5 clinical trials have tested potential treatments,6-8 and clinical screening....
tools have been developed specifically for this population. The MCI concept has undergone some criticism, however. In particular, some experts argue that MCI is usually better described as early AD, while others contend that MCI represents an unwarranted expansion of the neurologic disease spectrum. However, MCI continues to emerge as a clinical entity. Per a 2007 revision, the International Classification of Diseases now has a billing code for MCI (331.83). The DSM-V that is being developed will likely include a category corresponding to MCI.

Despite these developments, few data exist on MCI in clinical practice. Do clinicians use the MCI label? How do they view its benefits and limitations? What do they do for patients with MCI? Answers to these questions would be useful not only to tailor practice guidelines, but also to inform debate about the utility of the term. We report here on a survey that systematically examined neurology service providers’ attitudes and usual practices regarding patients with cognitive symptoms of mild severity.

**METHODS** Survey development and content. This project was undertaken as part of an Alzheimer Association-funded project to develop and evaluate an education and risk communication protocol for people with MCI. To inform protocol development, our group was interested in the extent to which MCI was being used in clinical practice, how providers viewed its benefits and limitations, and what constituted usual care with this population. A brief survey was therefore developed to assess neurology service providers’ attitudes and usual practices when caring for patients who present with cognitive symptoms of mild severity. A multidisciplinary team of experts created the survey, led by a first author with experience in developing reliable scales to measure AD-related attitudes and beliefs.

The survey was reviewed in multiple iterations by the Chairs of Geriatric and Behavioral Neurology, who suggested revisions to questionnaire items and ways to frame questions regarding cognitive symptoms. The survey was further reviewed by the AAN Geriatric and Behavioral Neurology sections. Two reminders were sent to nonrespondents. Respondents received a $25 gift certificate to the AAN Online Store.

**Survey recruitment and administration.** We selected the AAN because of its status as the main professional organization for neurologists in the United States and its capability via its Surveys and Research Department for implementing surveys of practicing clinicians. The main eligibility criterion for participation, determined via the most recent AAN Member Census, was a stated focus on aging/dementia or behavioral neurology in one’s practice. Per AAN policies, members who were still in medical school or residency, were retired, had received 3 or more AAN surveys in the last 3 years, or served on any of the committees sponsoring or reviewing the survey were excluded from the list of eligible participants. A random sample of 900 AAN members was selected from all eligible participants (n = 3,338). During data collection, 21 participants were removed because they either had invalid contact information or indicated that the survey’s topic was not relevant to their professional activities. The resulting sample size was 879.

The AAN Surveys and Research Department collected data from January to March 2009. The survey was administered in multiple formats, including by fax, mail, and Internet, with an initial cover letter/e-mail message from the Chairs of the AAN Geriatric and Behavioral Neurology sections. Two reminders were sent to nonrespondents. Respondents received a $25 gift certificate to the AAN Online Store.

**Data analyses.** The AAN Surveys and Research Department conducted data analyses. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize respondents in terms of their demographics and responses to survey items. Cronbach’s α was used to assess the reliability of the attitudes scale. t Tests and χ² analyses were used to compare 1) survey respondents to nonrespondents on basic demographic and practice characteristics (Likert-scale items were treated as categorical variables and sometimes collapsed for analyses), 2) responses between general neurologists and subspecialists, and 3) academic vs private practice clinicians. To correct for multiple comparisons, a significance level of p < 0.01 was used. The first author reviewed responses to open-ended items for common themes.
RESULTS  Survey respondents. A total of 420 clini-
cians responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 48%. The margin of error for all respondents
at a 95% confidence level was ±4.8%. Demographic and practice characteristics of respondents are pre-
sent in table 1. As compared to survey nonrespon-
dents, respondents were similar in age (mean = 54
years vs 53 years) and gender (79% male vs 78%
males). They differed in AAN membership type
(vs subspecialists or academic vs private practice clini-
cians). In the open-ended item, respondents defined
practice informationa

Table 1  Respondent demographics and practice information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, y, mean (SD)</td>
<td>54.0 (8.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, % men</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical specialty, %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurology</td>
<td>94.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuropsychology/clinical psychology</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatry</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geriatrics</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subspeciality training, % yes</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice setting, %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group practice</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo practice</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital or clinic</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Medical specialty percentages add up to greater than
100% because respondents could select more than 1 item
as appropriate.

Terms and definitions. The vast majority of respon-
dents (90.1%) reported that they recognized MCI as a
clinical diagnosis. A minority reported recognizing
AAMI (21.9%) and CIND (21.7%). Of those clini-
cians endorsing MCI, a majority reported also using
category subtypes including amnestic vs nonamnestic
(83.8%) and single vs multiple domain (50.7%). A
minority (5.7%) recognized other terms in-
cluding benign senescent forgetfulness, isolated
memory impairment, and memory loss. Responses in
this domain did not differ significantly by specialists
vs subspecialists or academic vs private practice clini-
cians. In the open-ended item, respondents defined
diagnostic terms above in various ways, citing pub-
lished diagnostic criteria,² noting Mini-Mental State
Examination cutoff scores, and offering general de-
scriptions of cognitive impairment without func-
tional impairment.

Usual practices. The vast majority of respondents
(88.3%) reported seeing patients with cognitive
symptoms of mild severity at least once a month
(with 65.1% reporting seeing such patients several
times a month). Respondents reported using a vari-
ety of medical codes for diagnostic or billing pur-
poses with this population, including MCI (70.3%),
memory loss (51.1%), AD (30%), cognitive disorder
not otherwise specified (NOS; 22.4%), dementia
NOS (15.4%), and amnestic disorder NOS (10.6%). Private practice respondents were more
likely to have used a memory loss code than academic
respondents (60% vs 37%, p < 0.0001), while aca-
demic respondents were more likely to have used cog-
nitive disorder NOS (32% vs 17%, p < 0.01).

Respondents reported counseling patients with
cognitive symptoms of mild severity on several topics
relevant to their well-being and brain health. A ma-
jority of respondents reported that they sometimes or
routinely counseled patients regarding 1) physical ex-
ercise (93.7%), 2) mental exercise (91.9%), 3) diet
and nutrition (70%), and 4) vitamins and supple-
ments (68.3%). There were also several educational
topics that respondents sometimes or routinely ad-
dressed with patients, including 1) recommendations
for monitoring and follow-up (98.7%), 2) risk of AD
in general terms (90%), 3) driving (85.1%), 4) sup-
port services (73.7%), and 5) advance planning
(72%). Relatively fewer respondents reported some-
times or routinely communicating about the follow-
ing: 1) research studies (67.6%), 2) AD risk in
numeric terms (59.1%), and 3) referral to the Alzhei-
mer’s Association or similar organization (44%).
Only 34.5% sometimes or routinely provided a writ-
ten summary letter of findings for the patient and
family. Academic respondents were more likely to
routinely communicate information about research
studies (32% vs 17%, p < 0.001) and routinely pro-
vide a written summary letter of findings (26% vs
10%, p < 0.001) than private practice respondents.

A total of 69.8% of respondents reported some-
times or routinely prescribing cholinesterase inhibi-
tors for patients with cognitive symptoms of mild
severity, with private practice respondents reporting
higher rates than academic respondents (77% vs 63%
p < 0.01). Overall, 39.2% reported sometimes or
routinely prescribing memantine. Over half of re-
pondents reported sometimes or routinely prescrib-
ing other medications, with antidepressants and
stimulants most frequently mentioned in this cate-
gory (along with supplements including Ginkgo bi-
loba). Table 2 summarizes responses in this domain.

Attitudes toward MCI. Each of the 6 benefit items
was endorsed with greater frequency than any of the
4 drawback/limitation items (p < 0.001). A majority
of respondents agreed with each of the following
statements: 1) labeling the problem is helpful for pa-
tients and family members (91.2% agree), 2) diagno-

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s is useful so the patient can be more involved in planning for the future (86.6% agree), 3) diagnosis can be useful in motivating the patient to engage in risk reduction activities (84.6% agree), 4) diagnosis helps the family with financial planning (72.3% agree), 5) certain medications can be useful in treating some patients with MCI (65.3% agree), and 6) diagnosis helps the family with insurance planning (55.6% agree). In open-ended responses, a common theme was that a MCI label alerts physicians and families to monitor for changes and progression of symptoms.

In contrast, fewer than one-quarter of respondents agreed with the following statements: 1) MCI is too difficult to diagnose accurately or reliably (23% agree), 2) MCI is usually better described as early AD (20.5% agree), 3) diagnosing MCI causes unnecessary worry for patients and family members (19.6% agree), and 4) there is no approved treatment for MCI so it does not make sense to diagnose it (8.3% agree). In open-ended responses, some noted that the MCI category was “too heterogeneous and vague,” claiming that such ambiguity frustrated both physicians and families; others called it an “invented” and not validated disease category. A description of responses to all close-ended items in this domain is provided in Table 3. The reliability estimate for this overall attitudes scale was 0.71.

**DISCUSSION**

Survey findings suggested that neurologists regularly see patients with cognitive symptoms of mild severity, with over 88% of respondents reporting at least monthly encounters. Practitioners preferred the MCI label for describing these patients, with 90% recognizing it as a clinical diagnosis (including over 80% who recognized its amnestic vs nonamnestic subtype) and 70% reporting they had already used the MCI code for diagnostic or billing purposes. Alternate terms (e.g., AAMI, CIND) and other diagnostic codes (e.g., memory loss, cognitive disorder NOS) were recognized and used by some respondents, with the frequency of such use varying by respondent practice type and subspecialty training status. Taken together, these findings suggest that the MCI concept has gained acceptance as a clinical category among neurologists treating this patient population.

Clinicians reported regularly addressing several topics when educating and counseling patients with mild cognitive symptoms and their family members. Most emphasized the need for monitoring and follow-up and discussed potential risks for dementia. Yet over 40% of respondents said they never or only rarely used quantitative estimates when discussing dementia risk. Fewer than half reported routinely addressing issues including driving, advance planning, and support services. Only 15% routinely provide a written summary letter of findings for patients and families (with this rate even lower among private practice respondents), and fewer than 10% routinely refer such patients to the Alzheimer’s Association. The variable frequency with which clinicians reported addressing these key topics suggests a need for guidelines and supplementary educational materials in this area, and the AAN is currently revising its MCI evidence-based medicine practice parameter for clinicians. The development of standardized education and counseling tools tailored for MCI populations may be appropriate to accompany these professional guidelines. For example, a growing body of literature on other diseases might be drawn upon to support the development of empirically validated tools for risk communication and decision support. Such materials may be particularly helpful for a population facing important decisions regarding future planning and treatment options while contending with symptoms that might potentially affect their decisional capacity.

Notably, respondents prescribe a variety of medications to treat patients with cognitive symptoms of mild severity, as shown in Table 3. The table depicts the usual practices when seeing patients with cognitive symptoms of mild severity, categorized by patient education, patient counseling, medications prescribed, and written summary letter of findings for patients and families. The reliability estimate for this overall attitudes scale was 0.71.

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Never, %</th>
<th>Rarely, %</th>
<th>Sometimes, %</th>
<th>Routinely, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patient counseling</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical exercise</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>77.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental exercise</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>74.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet and nutrition</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamins or supplements</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Patient education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for monitoring</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>88.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and follow-up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of Alzheimer disease</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(general terms)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance planning</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support services</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of Alzheimer disease</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(numeric estimates)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research studies</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written summary letter</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral to Alzheimer’s</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medications prescribed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholinesterase inhibitors</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memantine</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Most commonly cited in open-ended responses were vitamins (n = 19), antidepressants (n = 13), and Ginkgo biloba (n = 8).
mild severity, including cholinesterase inhibitors (70% sometimes or routinely), memantine (nearly 40% sometimes or routinely), and other agents including vitamin E and *Ginkgo biloba*. In addition, two-thirds of respondents reported sometimes or routinely counseling patients about vitamin and supplement use, although none are proven to reduce risk of dementia in patients with MCI. Although our data do not allow us to comment on the appropriateness of treatment in a given case, the frequency of reported medication use (particularly among private practice respondents) is striking given that there are no medications that are approved by the Food and Drug Administration specifically for the treatment of MCI. Although several clinical trials have been conducted with MCI populations, to date none have achieved their primary outcomes. One of the largest trials, sponsored by the National Institute on Aging and Pfizer, Inc. through the Alzheimer’s Disease Cooperative Study Group, examined the treatment effects of donepezil and vitamin E on an amnestic MCI population in a multicenter randomized clinical trial. Participants in the donepezil group had a reduced risk of progressing to AD for 12 months and for up to 24 months in the *APOE* e4 carrier subset. No treatment effect occurred in the vitamin E group.

Our data on reported medication use are consistent with a recent study of nearly 600 patients with MCI treated across 10 AD research centers of California, which found that almost 30% of patients were receiving anti-AD medications “off-label.” It may be that clinicians consider some patients with MCI to already be in the early stages of AD (e.g., 30% of respondents have used the AD billing code for patients with mild cognitive symptoms) and therefore appropriate for use of cholinesterase inhibitors and memantine. Nevertheless, given these potential trends toward overutilization of medications to treat MCI, as well as numerous “brain health” products being marketed over-the-counter to individuals with concerns about their cognitive functioning, it will be important to educate practitioners and patients alike on the benefits and limitations of emerging treatment options in MCI.

Overall, respondents believed that the benefits of a clinical diagnosis of MCI outweighed its potential drawbacks and limitations. These findings suggest that clinicians generally find the MCI concept a useful diagnostic tool to inform treatment, education, and advance planning with patients and families. In open-ended responses, some respondents also expressed the view that an MCI diagnosis was reassuring to patients and families by labeling “what they already know” and allowing them “to do their homework and explore the problem on their own.” The most commonly endorsed limitation was that MCI is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Perceptions of benefits, drawbacks, and limitations of MCI as a clinical diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree, %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labeling the problem is helpful for patients and family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis is useful so the patient can be more involved in planning for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis can be useful in motivating the patient to engage in risk reduction activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis helps the family with financial planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis helps the family with insurance planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain medications can be useful in treating some patients with MCI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawbacks and limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCI is too difficult to diagnose accurately or reliably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCI is usually better described as early Alzheimer disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosing MCI causes unnecessary worry for patients and family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no approved treatment for MCI so it does not make sense to diagnose it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviation: MCI – mild cognitive impairment.
too difficult to diagnose accurately or reliably. This finding among one-quarter of specialty providers suggests that incorporating MCI into primary care may pose diagnostic challenges. Relatively few respondents believed a MCI diagnosis would cause unnecessary worry among patients and families, a notion supported by recent psychological studies in the area. The strongest beliefs about drawbacks were expressed in open-ended responses by neurologists who objected to the notion of MCI as a formal clinical category, implying that MCI is often better characterized as early dementia. These views reflect the sometimes contentious nature of the debate about MCI.

Limitations to this study include that survey responses are subject to self-report recall biases and do not provide information about the quality of provider interactions with patients with MCI and their family members. Future studies should seek more objective measures of outcomes such as billing codes used and medications prescribed. Exploration of patient–provider communication and treatment decision-making (e.g., via audiorecording of clinical encounters) may also be warranted. While respondents were similar to nonrespondents on key demographic characteristics, they may differ from the general population of neurologists seeing patients with MCI in terms of their usual practices or attitudes. For example, the use of the MCI term in survey recruitment materials may have attracted respondents more inclined to use this category and view it in strong terms (favorable or unfavorable). The overall response rate, while not ideal, was typical for surveys of practicing physicians, who tend to respond less frequently to survey requests than other groups. This survey primarily involved neurologists, but other medical professionals (e.g., geriatricians, internists, allied health professionals) often encounter MCI and should therefore be queried in future research (of note here, a recent survey of 163 geriatricians in Australia and New Zealand also found that MCI was being commonly used in clinics, but other medical professionals (e.g., geriatricians) who objected to the notion of MCI as a formal clinical category, implying that MCI is often better characterized as early dementia. These views reflect the sometimes contentious nature of the debate about MCI.

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REFERENCES


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