

New study on brain exercises for healthy ageing in people with Down syndrome

May 19 2015, by Yolanda Kennedy

Researchers specialising in ageing in persons with an intellectual disability at Trinity College Dublin have just begun a new study to examine if cognitive training for adults with Down syndrome can have a protective effect for healthy ageing. The study is being conducted in the context of a growing concern by the researchers involved regarding levels of dementia in an ageing Down syndrome population in Ireland and varying standards of care, support and diagnostic pathways around the country.

The BEADS study (Brain Exercises for Adults with Down syndrome) will investigate the feasibility of using existing brain training games with a cohort of older adults with Down syndrome without [dementia](#), and measure the effectiveness of the training in positively influencing levels of executive functioning such as planning, attention and memory.

Dementia is a critical issue for adults with Down syndrome, both in terms of rates of occurrence and the early age of onset in this particular group of people. In a recent report by [IDS-TILDA](#), the Intellectual Disability Supplement to The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, the researchers found that in the three year period since the first wave of data collection was conducted in 2010, the prevalence of dementia among people with Down syndrome had almost doubled from 15.8% to 29.9%. These are much higher levels than the 1.5% seen in the general population. Other Trinity studies have found that the average age of onset of dementia for people with Down syndrome was 55 years of age with some cases presenting in their early 40's. By comparison, onset for

the majority of people with dementia in the general population was at over 65 years of age.

In the [general population](#) there has been a lot of research conducted on the protective value of cognitive stimulation, or brain training, and its importance in healthy ageing. This is even more vital in a population of adults with Down syndrome as typically fewer opportunities for [cognitive training](#) and development were presented throughout their lives. As of yet, there has been little work in Ireland or indeed internationally on cognitive training and its influence on executive functioning for [older adults](#) with intellectual disabilities.

Speaking about the importance of conducting new research which will address the challenges with increasing levels of dementia in people with Down syndrome in Ireland, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences in Trinity and Principal Investigator of IDS-TILDA, Professor Mary McCarron said: "Dementia has become such a significant challenge to the successful ageing of people with Down syndrome and we must do more than simply provide care. Other successes in the lives of people with Down syndrome occurred because we found new ways to increase opportunities; we can do no less as we confront the challenge of dementia."

"In tandem with new studies such as BEADS which hope to help with improved levels of healthy ageing for people with Down [syndrome](#), the Irish healthcare system must also urgently address the specific diagnostic and care needs of this group of people in a comprehensive, systematic and consistent way," Professor McCarron concluded.

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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