

Should Doctors Offer Biomarker Testing to Those Afraid to Develop Alzheimer's Dementia

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Abstract:

An increasing number of people seek medical attention for mild cognitive symptoms at older age, worried that they might develop Alzheimer's disease. Some clinical practice guidelines suggest offering biomarker testing in such cases, using a brain scan or a lumbar puncture, to improve diagnostic certainty about Alzheimer's disease and enable an earlier diagnosis. Critics, on the other hand, point out that there is no effective Alzheimer treatment available and argue that biomarker tests lack clinical validity. The debate on the ethical desirability of biomarker testing is currently polarized; advocates and opponents tend to focus on their own line of arguments. In this paper, we show how the method of reflective equilibrium (RE) can be used to systematically weigh the relevant arguments on both sides of the debate to decide whether to offer Alzheimer biomarker testing. In the tradition of RE, we reflect upon these arguments in light of their coherence with other argumentative elements, including relevant facts (e.g. on the clinical validity of the test), ethical principles, and theories on societal ideals or relevant concepts, such as autonomy. Our stance in the debate therefore rests upon previously set out in-depth arguments and reflects a wide societal perspective.

Published: 19 March 2022

Journal of Bioethical Inquiry

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11673-022-10167-x>