

LETTERS

ONSET OF COGNITIVE DECLINE

But some things improve with ageJake Harwood *professor of communication*

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In their study of the timing of the onset of cognitive decline in the Whitehall II cohort, Singh-Manoux and colleagues emphasise decline and ignore the gains that occur with ageing.¹ They do not mention that vocabulary increases in most of the analyses reported. Three of the four analyses that control for education show significant increases in vocabulary with age; the one analysis that showed decline is a cross-sectional analysis of women, which they somewhat discount in their discussion. The figure shows increasing vocabulary with age in five groups, non-significant effects in three, and significant decline in only two (men aged 60-64 and 65-70). Yet, even the column headings for the statistical analyses showing increases in vocabulary are labelled “decline.”

They merely state in the text that everything declined “except vocabulary” without acknowledging that it increased.

They state in the discussion, “The results for vocabulary were expected as it is known to be little influenced by age” (although they still do not describe the results), citing a 1991 review. This review states that “scores on vocabulary tests show much less decline or even continue to increase until very late in life.”

Substantial research shows increases in vocabulary at least until age 60,² and probably into the mid-70s.^{3 4}

Failure to acknowledge improvement reinforces the message that no positive changes occur with ageing. As research explores cognitive decline at earlier and earlier ages, we must not forget these positive changes. If our examinations of cognitive ageing look only for decline, then that is what we will find, and we will fail in our goal to understand the full range of changes that occur across the lifespan.

Competing interests: None declared.

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- 2 Salthouse TA. When does age-related cognitive decline begin? *Neurobiol Aging* 2009;30:507-14.
- 3 Small BJ, Dixon RA, McArdle JJ. Tracking cognition-health changes from 55 to 95 years of age. *J Gerontol Ser B Psychol Sci Soc Sci* 2011;66B(S1):i153-61.
- 4 Kemper S, Sumner A. The structure of verbal abilities in young and older adults. *Psychol Aging* 2001;16:312-22.

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