Higher risk of Alzheimer's found among underserved population

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A University of Texas at Arlington research team found that foreign-born women of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent are 2.5 times more likely to have an undiagnosed case of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) compared to U.S.-born white women.

The research, led by Assistant Professor of Kinesiology Tiffany Kindratt, appears in the Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health.

"Alzheimer's disease is growing, and half of the cases are usually undiagnosed," said Kindratt, who also is director of the Health Survey

Research Lab. "That's where we started to see a large disparity with MENA individuals and cognitive health."

Her team examined data from 2000-18 in both the National Health Interview Survey and Medical Expenditure Panel Survey. Age is the greatest risk factor for ADRD, but psychological health and depression also play a role. An additional risk factor stems from a lack of early life education, especially up to the eighth grade, and its impact on cognitive reserve, the brain's ability to cope with problems and challenges. Not having a high school education also increases the risk of having ADRD later on, Kindratt said.

She has argued for what she said is a critical addition of a MENA checkbox on federal forms, including the U.S. Census. In another paper, published in the Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities, she found that the vast majority of those who commented on potential changes to ethnicity data collection in the U.S. were in favor of adding the checkbox.

The recently released research findings underscore the need for federal recognition of MENA descent, inclusive of Arab Americans, as a distinct demographic group, Kindratt said. Currently, those of MENA descent are considered white by the federal government, which prevents funding or resources from being specifically allocated for their needs.

Those needs are further explained in a chapter written by Kindratt in the new textbook Biopsychosocial Perspective on Arab Americans, which examines mortality estimates of Arab Americans in hopes of providing a clearer picture of their specific health concerns.

"Having a checkbox so someone can say they are of this descent would be much better than combing through data to infer that this is their identity," she said.

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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