

## **Exploring the information and support needs of owners caring for a dog with canine cognitive dysfunction**

de Meester, Daisy G. ; Tabor, Gillian

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# Exploring the information and support needs of owners caring for a dog with canine cognitive dysfunction



## 1. Introduction:

Canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD) is an age-related neurodegenerative disease, sharing similar symptoms and physiological traits to Alzheimer's disease in humans (Adams et al., 2000), and requiring a high level of care from the owner. The life expectancy of modern pets has increased, resulting in a growing emphasis on developing the treatment and management of age-related diseases (Reid and Peterson, 2000). Whilst in veterinary research it is recognized that CCD has a large impact on the owner as well as the dog (Fast et al., 2013), there is a paucity of research identifying support and information provided to those caring for dogs with CCD, and how effective this is in enabling owners to care for their dog.

## 2. Aims:

1. To explore the key impacts of CCD, information and support provided to dog owners at the time of CCD diagnosis.
2. Investigate the sources of information and support owners engaged with following diagnosis.
3. Critically evaluate how support and information sources have impacted owners, including how they support their dog.
4. To make recommendations based on results, of strategies to improve the support offered when facing a diagnosis of CCD.

## 3. Methods:

Sixty-six respondents recruited via senior dog and specific condition groups and pages on Facebook®, using purposive and snowball sampling, completed an online exploratory survey. This gained demographic information of dog and owner, explored participants experience and understanding of CCD, and information options at and following diagnosis.

Following this, semi structured interviews were completed with six participants, focusing on owner's experiences of diagnosis, and exploring the effectiveness of strategies of providing information and support. Data was transcribed and thematic analysis completed using the six-stage process, as defined by Braun & Clarke (2006).

## 4. Results:

### Survey -

The country the respondents lived in varied, however, there were no notable outliers in responses from different countries. Most respondents 98.48% (n=65) reported feeling that improving their understanding of CCD through independent research and veterinary support had been beneficial in supporting their dog, though it was highlighted that it was difficult to find understandable and reputable sources. Whilst many felt well supported by clinicians there was also frustration expressed at "vague" treatment pathways, lack knowledge of the condition and lack of understanding of the lived experience.

All respondents (n=66) felt owners should receive support with a wide range of challenges associated with CCD following diagnosis, Changes to sleep-wake cycle was selected by 95.45% (n=63) of respondents whilst pacing was the second most identified area selected by 84.85% (n=56) of respondents. Another key area was planning for a decline in health (n=55, 83.33%), similarly, one respondent detailed that they would appreciate more support and information with end-of-life care, even when their dog is still healthy.

### Interviews -

Results from the survey were used to formulate interview questions. Six semi structured interviews were completed. From the interviews six key themes (Figure 1) were identified:

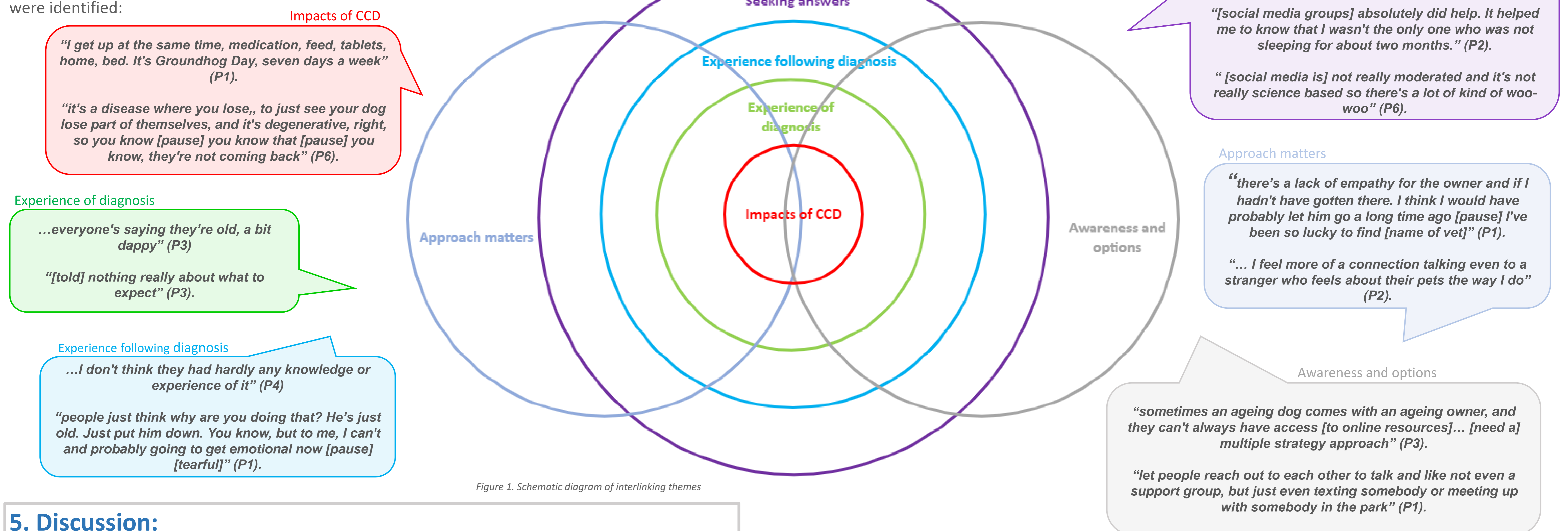


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of interlinking themes

## 5. Discussion:

The survey results indicated a multitude of impacts that owners would benefit from additional information and support with, and identified that whilst effective support is important, it is often difficult to access.

The interviews supported the findings from the survey and further explored different approaches to information and support provision, highlighting the importance of a multimodal approach to improve accessibility.

### Recommendations:

- It is important that information provided is clear, accessible and described in lay terms.
- A variety of moderated resources, available in different formats to improve accessibility, that owners can be signposted to is needed to ensure reliability of information.
- Information and support should be tailored to the person and opportunities for peer support should be offered as appropriate.
- Support should be given with quality of life and declining health decisions and plans.

### Limitations:

- Due to using social media for recruitment, there is a risk of recruitment bias towards participants who use this platform for support.
- The time taken to complete open questions or participate in an interview is likely to bias a sample who feel strongly about current information and support provision.

## 6. Conclusion:

Effective support and information are important in helping owners to care for their dog with CCD, including managing symptoms that can lead to carer strain and associated health implications for the owner. This research highlighted that often owners struggle to get accurate information and support at the time they need it, however when appropriate and easily accessible, support and information can be effective at helping them to navigate the stressors of CCD. Recommendations include signposting to clear and reliable resources and increased awareness of the variety of symptoms CCD can present with. Owner's value being listened to, and peer support should be facilitated as appropriate. Provision of accessible and focused resources is vital to ensuring the wellbeing of both the owner and the aging dog with CCD.

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