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Differential Diagnosis

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Definition

Differential diagnosis refers to the process of differentiating one diagnosis from another, and in turn, providing the most fitting diagnosis based on an individual's presentation. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, for instance, has historically defined diagnoses from a categorical perspective, with many diagnoses having features in common with one another. This requires careful consideration of all features of an individual's presentation and the fine details of the diagnosis itself.

Current Knowledge

In neuropsychology, the process of providing the most fitting diagnosis for a patient involves assessment of the possible causes of the patient's

current condition as well as a consideration of characteristics of the cognitive and neurobehavioral presentation. This process must take into consideration the possible organic sources of the presentation (e.g., congenital brain anomaly or event, HIV status, brain tumor, neuronal demyelination, etc.), psychiatric concerns (psychosis, severe depression), medical interventions (e.g., pharmaceuticals), and substance use. In addition, age of onset of dysfunction, change over time in functioning, neurological findings, and cultural beliefs and rituals may assist in differentiating a diagnosis. For example, in differentiating dementia from memory deficits occurring secondary to a severe mood disorder, one must consider age of onset of difficulties, change in functioning across time, medical conditions associated with memory difficulties and mood symptoms, brain injury, acute and long-term substance use, developmental history, present-life circumstances and any previous treatment. Assessment over time is also very likely to contribute to differentiating a dementing disorder from cognitive difficulties occurring secondary to psychiatric disturbance.