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Abstract Title

Divergent Late-Life Trajectories by Disclosure Status Among Former Prisoners of War: A 76-Year Prospective Cohort Study of Royal Canadian Air Force Veterans

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Background

Allied aircrew captured during the Second World War endured immense psychological distress, caloric deprivation, and loss of autonomy.

Objective

To determine whether captivity produces a life-course pattern of early psychiatric, intermediate metabolic, and late-life vascular and neoplastic morbidity, and whether non-disclosure modifies these trajectories.

Methods

We conducted a prospective cohort analysis within the Manitoba Follow-Up Study of 3,983 Royal Canadian Air Force aircrew followed since 1948. Former prisoners of war (PoWs; n=310) were identified via archival linkage and stratified into acknowledged PoWs (self-disclosed captivity; n=151) and discordant PoWs (confirmed captivity without self-disclosure; n=159). Incident ischemic heart disease (IHD) and all-cause mortality were analyzed using Cox models. To minimize immortal time bias, we analyzed 3,073 men alive at a 1982 landmark.

Results

Overall, PoWs did not differ significantly from controls in IHD (HR 1.05; 95% CI, 0.87–1.26) or mortality (HR 0.98; 95% CI, 0.88–1.11), although cerebrovascular disease was elevated (HR 1.26; 95% CI, 1.01–1.58). Stratification by disclosure status revealed divergent trajectories: acknowledged PoWs demonstrated higher IHD risk than discordant PoWs (HR 1.91; 95% CI, 1.11–3.28) and elevated peripheral artery disease versus controls (HR 1.55; 95% CI, 1.01–2.40). Discordant PoWs exhibited elevated non-skin cancer (HR 1.37; 95% CI, 1.01–1.85) and a trend toward cerebrovascular disease (HR 1.41; 95% CI, 0.98–2.02). Cause-specific mortality differed across groups (p=0.043), driven by aircraft accident deaths among discordant PoWs (8.8% vs. 3.4% and 0.7%).

Conclusion

These findings indicate two divergent post-captivity trajectories rather than a uniform captivity effect, highlighting the need for proactive trauma-history screening in clinical settings.