

Memory Clinics: On the 25th anniversary of the first Memory Clinic in Portugal

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ABSTRACT: Memory Clinics have first appeared in the 1980s, in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom, focusing on early stages of cognitive decline. The first memory clinic in Portugal was officially founded on the 4th October 2001, in Lisbon. Since then, *MemoClínica* followed a multidisciplinary approach to the diagnosis and treatment of patients with cognitive complaints, keeping up with scientific advances and novel technologies in the field. Participation in research has also been a priority of *MemoClínica*. The perspectives and challenges that Memory Clinics will possibly face in the near future are briefly discussed.

KEYWORDS: Memory Clinic; Mild Cognitive Impairment; History of Medicine; Portugal

It is generally considered that Memory Clinics have first appeared in the 1980s, in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom.^[1,2] Interestingly, the first initiatives toward these clinics adopted different names, *centre de mémoire*, memory clinic, memory disorders research unit, and were not initially subjected to formal publication.^[3]

In the following years, the main characteristics of Memory Clinics became established, namely the focus on early stages of cognitive decline, the use of a multidisciplinary team approach, the purpose to promote pharmacological interventions and cognitive therapies, and the vocation to foster research and education for healthcare professionals as well as promotion of mental health in the general population.^[4,5] Some evidence that memory clinics might improve psychosocial health related quality of life in caregivers was presented.^[6] Practical orientations regarding the set up and the operation of a memory clinic were advanced.^[7] The role and utility of Memory Clinics, however, have not been exempt from controversy.^[8]

MemoClínica^[9] was officially founded on the 4th October 2001, in Lisbon. The founding partners were three neurologists, Carlos Garcia, Helena Coelho (both deceased) and Alexandre de Mendonça, a neuropsychologist, Manuela

Guerreiro, and a general practitioner, Rui Alves. A psychiatrist, Frederico Simões do Couto, joined the society later on. Thus, *MemoClínica* assumed a multidisciplinary approach from the beginning. Several other professionals, including speech therapist, rehabilitation psychologist, nurse, clinical geneticist and endocrinologist, were enrolled as collaborators along the time.

The founders already had extensive clinical experience at a dementia outpatient facility in a large public hospital, Hospital de Santa Maria, where essentially patients with dementia were observed at that time. The founders felt the need to pay more attention to initial stages of cognitive decline. Clearly, it was a time for change. The concept of Mild Cognitive Impairment had been advanced, putative disease-modifying treatments were being tested, the population was ageing and awareness of Alzheimer's disease was growing in the society. As a consequence, the emphasis on early diagnosis was raising.^[10] However, the concept of Memory Clinic was not at all familiar, the famous columnist Eduardo Prado Coelho would write with some surprise *Subia a Avenida António Augusto de Aguiar, quando vi à minha direita uma clínica de memória* (Público, 2004).^[11]

In the following years, for an earlier and more precise diagnosis, the clinic had to keep up with ground-breaking scientific advances and novel technologies, developing an informal network including excellence centres of magnetic resonance, genetics, neurochemistry and nuclear medicine. Importantly, the members of *MemoClínica*, as researchers at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Lisbon, participated in main European scientific consortia in the field. As a consequence, *MemoClínica* has been always actively involved in research, essentially devoted to the initial stages of cognitive decline, and its contribution was explicitly acknowledged in full publications in international peer-reviewed scientific journals.

We must recognize that *MemoClínica* could keep a personal, charming character all these years. A showcase exhibits Carlos Garcia's collection of medical doctors miniatures,^[12] generously provided by Eng^o João Coelho Garcia. On the walls we can see paintings owned by Carlos Garcia and Helena Coelho, as well as a nice didactic drawing from Carlos Garcia (Figure 1).

A final word about the perspectives and challenges that Memory Clinics will possibly face in the near future. A

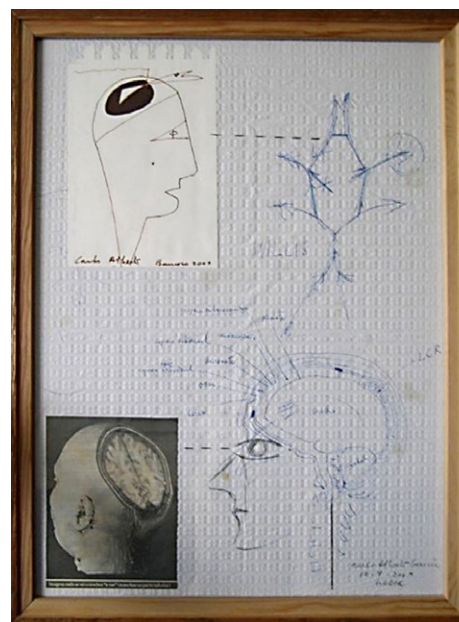


Fig 1. Didactic drawing, by Carlos Garcia, illustrating anatomical aspects of the Willis circle and the meninges. The collage on the top left is a sketch from the visual artist Carlos Barroco. The legend of the collage down on the left is *Imagem onde se vê o cérebro 'a ver'*.

second-generation of memory clinics was recently proposed, the Brain Health Services. In a comparable trend as the concept of Memory Clinics, that was developed to focus on the initial stages of cognitive decline, the Brain Health Services would move still earlier, to the evidence-based prevention of cognitive decline in healthy at-risk individuals.^[13] Where Memory Clinics should integrate the dementia care path has been questioned, particularly under the constraints of overwhelmed healthcare systems.^[14] How the Memory Clinics will incorporate the novel digital health technologies is also a subject of debate.^[15] Another challenge we can anticipate are the recently approved disease-modifying anti-amyloid antibody treatments, requiring demanding conditions of access, selection, administration and side effects monitoring.^[16]

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

*The authors have no conflicts of interest.
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