

Korsakoff Syndrome – 7 Minute Briefing

1) Korsakoff syndrome (also known as Korsakoff's amnesic syndrome) is a memory disorder that results from vitamin B1 deficiency and is associated with alcoholism. Korsakoff's syndrome damages nerve cells and supporting cells in the brain and spinal cord, as well as the part of the brain involved with memory.

2) Korsakoff's syndrome is a form of Dementia. The figures show that 39 per cent of people diagnosed with dementia before the age of 65 had symptoms indicating brain damage linked to alcohol. Memory problems associated with Korsakoff's can occur more gradually and the symptoms are usually attention and concentration problems, gaps in memory which are usually filled inaccurately (confabulation) and a difficulty learning new information.

7) While it is recognised that mental capacity is time and decision specific, in highly complex cases where decisions lie with multidisciplinary teams, the importance of specialist mental capacity assessment that takes account of a range of professional perspectives cannot be underestimated.

6) When mental health professionals work with a client who may be confabulating, it is vital that the professional tries to corroborate any information self-reported by the client. This could take the form of talking to collateral informants like friends and family members or finding corroborating evidence such as medical or criminal justice records.

Further Information:

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/about-dementia/types-dementia/wernicke-korsakoff-syndrome>



3) Confabulation is the creation of false memories in the absence of intentions of deception. Individuals who confabulate have no recognition that the information being relayed to others is fabricated. Confabulating individuals are not intentionally being deceptive and sincerely believe the information they are communicating to be genuine and accurate. This can make assessing a person's Mental Capacity particularly complex.

5) People tend to assume that the accuracy of a memory increases with the reporter's level of confidence in the memory. However, people with Korsakoff's may be reporting a confabulated memory with a greatly inflated level of confidence. The confabulation is false, by definition, yet they have confidence in its accuracy. As such, professionals should be careful not to mistake a client's confidence in memory as an indicator of the memory's accuracy.

4) When the person is presented with information that directly conflicts with their version of events, they will persist in believing their memories are wholly accurate. Professionals assessing mental capacity must be vigilant about its identification to gather accurate information from a client and to provide optimal treatment strategies.