Sex differences in medication and primary healthcare use before and after spousal bereavement at older ages in Denmark – nationwide register study of over 6000 bereavements

by

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Background

- **Mortality disadvantage after spousal loss**
  Increased all-cause & cancer mortality, mortality from CVD, respiratory diseases, accidents and violence (Finland, UK, & the US)

- **Health disadvantage after conjugal loss**
  Higher levels of depressive symptoms, poorer physical and cognitive function, worse self-rated health & an increased risk of institutionalization

- **Sex differences in widowhood effect**
  Adverse effects of widowhood on mortality & other health outcomes are greater in widowers than among widows
Background: Denmark

- Substantially higher increase in suicide risks in the oldest-old widowers than widows, but less pronounced sex differences in younger age groups

- Higher widowhood effect among male twins than among female twins after a spouse’s death

- Similar bereavement effect after a co-twin’s death in both sexes
Background: Proposed explanations

- **Immediate distress:** Changes in cardiovascular, autonomous nervous, immune and endocrine systems

- **Loss of social support:** Wider and stronger social networks among women than among men, especially after retirement

- **Changes in lifestyle behavior:** Smoking, alcohol and substance abuse are less frequent & sleeping and eating patterns are more regular among married

- **Changes in health regulating activities:** Use of medications and primary healthcare and other services (e.g. influenza vaccination and diabetic monitoring)
Aim and hypotheses

Aim:
Investigate sex differences in short and longer term healthcare use following conjugal loss by comparing medication and primary healthcare use before and after a spouse’s death.

Hypotheses:
After a spouse’s death elderly men will reduce medication use and visits to general practitioners (GPs). Women will maintain or increase their healthcare utilization compared to the preloss level.
Methods: Data

- **5% sample of the total Danish population & all Danish twins**
  5% of all persons from each birth year 1890-2004 (approx. 2600 persons/year)

- **Civil Registration System** (since April 1968)
  10-digit unique personal identifier (CPR-number)

- **Cover the complete Danish population**

- **Have different span**
  Prescription Medicine Register (since 1995)
  Health Insurance Register (since 1997)
  Danish Twin Register (since 1954 for cohorts born from 1870)
Methods: Study population

- All individuals alive & aged ≥60 years by Jan 1, 1996
- Married for at least one year prior to Jan 1, 1996
- Became widowed in the period from Jan 1, 1996 to Jan 31, 2003
- Survival status available through Dec 2006

(n=6,421)
Methods: Study instrument

- **Medication use**
  Average daily defined dose (DDD)
  For all-cause and several major system-specific medications: cardiovascular (ATC-C), nervous (ATC-N), respiratory (ATC-R), and alimentary tract and metabolism (ATC-A) medications

- **Primary healthcare use**
  Number of GPs visits per year

- **Within 1 yr before and up to 4 yrs after widowhood**
- **Adjusted to the time at risk**
Results

- Higher average use of all-cause and ATC-N medications and GP visits in women
- Higher average use of ATC-R medications in men (not always statistically significant)
- Less clear sex-specific patterns for ATC-C and ATC-A medications

- All-cause and system-specific medication use and GP visits increased from 1 year before to 1 year after widowhood, men and women
- Increase in all-cause, ATC-C, and ATC-R medication use slightly higher in men, but significant in the 80+ years old only
Trajectories of all-cause medication use and GP visits

All-cause ATC medications

Number of GP visits per year

Average DDD

Average No. of visits

Years since widowhood

Years since widowhood

-1 1 2 3 4 5

-1 1 2 3 4

Men, 60-69 yr

Men, 70-79 yr

Men, 80+ yr

Women, 60-69 yr

Women, 70-79 yr

Women, 80+ yr
Trajectories of system-specific medication use
Trajectories of all-cause medication use in survivors

![Graph showing trajectories of medication use over years since widowhood for 3-year and 5-year survivors, with data points for different age groups of men and women.](image-url)
Methodological considerations

- Analysis of healthcare use reflects both the effect of age & the effect of widowhood
  - Unlikely to bias the analysis of male-female differences in healthcare use

- Country-specific findings
  - Greater gender equality in the division of household labor in Sweden and Denmark vs. Greece or Spain
  - Less dependence on the wives for regulating health behaviors among Danish men
Summary

- Women use prescription medicines more than men, especially anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications.
- Medication and primary healthcare use increased short- and long-term after widowhood.
- No sex-specific pattern in the trajectories of medication use and GP visits over short and long period after conjugal loss.
- Little support for the hypothesis that widowers reduce medication use or visits to GPs compared to a preloss level.
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Trajectories of all-cause medication use and GP visits by marital status
Trajectories of ATC-C and ATC-N medication use by marital status

Men

Women

Years since widowhood

Widowed, 60-69 yrs

Widowed, 70-79 yrs

Widowed, 80+ yrs

Married, 60-69 yrs

Married, 70-79 yrs

Married, 80+ yrs

Av. DDD for ATC-C

Av. DDD for ATC-N
Trajectories of ATC-R and ATC-A medication use by marital status

Men

Women

Av. DDD for ATC-R

Av. DDD for ATC-A

Years since widowhood

Widowed, 60-69 yrs

Married, 60-69 yrs

Widowed, 70-79 yrs

Married, 70-79 yrs

Widowed, 80+ yrs

Married, 80+ yrs
Trajectories of all-cause medication use among survivors by marital status

[Graph showing trends in medication use for men and women across different years since widowhood and marital status categories.]
Methodological considerations

- Size, representativeness, and completeness of the Danish register data and its longitudinal nature

- Free access to healthcare for each resident in Denmark
  Danish register data less confounded by SES than in some other countries

- Data extracted for all study participants
  Little room for selection bias due to non-participation or loss to follow-up inherent in longitudinal surveys
Sex differences in the trajectories of all-cause medication use and number of GP visits by sex and marital status
Sex differences in the trajectories of ATC-C and ATC-N medication use by sex and marital status

![Graphs showing the trajectories of ATC-C and ATC-N medication use for different age groups and marital statuses.](Image)
Sex differences in the trajectories of ATC-R and ATC-A medication use by sex and marital status

Widowed

Married

Av. DDD for ATC-R

Av. DDD for ATC-A

Years since widowhood

Years since widowhood

- Men, 60-69 yrs
- Men, 70-79 yrs
- Men, 80+ yrs
- Women, 60-69 yrs
- Women, 70-79 yrs
- Women, 80+ yrs
Sex differences in the trajectories of all-cause medication use in 3-year and 5-year survivors by sex and marital status