Frailty: searching for a relevant clinical and research paradigm

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The concept of frailty has received increasing attention among clinicians and researchers. Clinicians often say, "I know frailty when I see it, but I can't define it". This is not surprising given that in spite of a growing body of knowledge, there is no widely accepted definition of frailty. The literature abounds with different models, criteria and definitions. While consensus has yet to be attained, work accomplished to date while revealing exciting new horizons, has also raised important issues and questions. The presentation will discuss existing models of frailty, the complex relationship between the concepts of frailty, aging, and disability, and implications of applying this concept in the clinical and research setting.

Although there remains debate on the conceptual and operational definition of frailty, there has been increasing interest to utilize frailty as a clinical prognostic tool in order to predict various outcomes in individual patients. Essentially all of the research on frailty to date has been based on secondary analyses examining explanatory ability, that is, testing frailty as a significant risk factor for adverse outcomes within a given study population. Many authors have used those results to infer predictive ability, that is, the ability of frailty to predict adverse outcomes in new out-of-sample subjects. However, even highly significant risk factors can make poor predictors for a prognostic tool. Little is known of the true predictive ability of frailty in new subjects in various clinical settings. Recently, there have been a few papers reporting the predictive ability of their frailty models. However, we have yet to elucidate what frailty actually adds to basic demographic and medical information, such as age, sex and the number of chronic diseases.

The presentation will discuss existing models of frailty, the complex relationship between the concepts of frailty, aging, and disability, and implications for developing relevant clinical instruments.