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IMMUNOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS IN CAREGIVERS OF AUTISTIC OFFSPRING

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Introduction: Caregivers of relatives with chronic diseases has shown lower rest levels of immunoglobulin A than non-caregivers (Gallagher et al., 2008). In response to mental stress, IgA levels used to be increased in healthy population (Okamura et al. 2010). Scarce studies have been focused on immunological effects of caregiving in response to stress, and the results are controversial. To our knowledge, there are no studies stressing this field in chronically stressed populations such as caregivers of autistic offspring.

Objectives and aims: Evaluate whether caregivers present different psychosocial and immunological responses to acute stress than non-caregivers, as well as what is the role of gender in these responses.

Methods: 38 caregivers of persons with autism and 35 non-caregivers were exposed to a psychosocial laboratory stress. IgA levels were measured before, during and after a set of several mental tasks, while the state of mood was evaluated before and after the stressors.

Results: Caregivers showed blunted IgA response to stress in men and women compared with non-caregivers, although the response pattern was different for each gender. Moreover, caregivers presented worse mood (depression, anger, fatigue, vigor and total score) than non-caregivers. Moreover, psychological effects of stress are inversely associated with levels of IgA, fundamentally during the task.

Conclusions: Caregiving reduces IgA secretion in response to psychosocial stress, although differently in men and women. Further studies are necessary to explore other neuroendocrine factors, together with mood, that could be involved in this buffered response.