

News

Office of Medical Information
The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235-9060 214/688-3404

October 24, 1989

CONTACT: Ann Harrell
Office: 214/688-3404
Home: 214/520-7509
Fax: 214/688-8252

****Psychologist seeks early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease

Currently the only way to get a definite diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease is a brain autopsy--and at that point it's too late for diagnosis to be of help to either the patient or the family. Jim Hom, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, believes there's got to be a better way.

Dr. Hom is a neuropsychologist who studies the aging of the human brain in both disease and disease-free states. He is director of a new study of the effects of Alzheimer's disease and aging in the brain, following patients and healthy individuals for five years. The researcher said he hopes the information gained from this study will lead to the development of a definite profile of the Alzheimer's patient that can clearly distinguish between patients with this disease and patients with multiple strokes. Another goal is to gain new insights into aging in the normal brain. He is seeking volunteers for the study.

Although at present there is no treatment for Alzheimer's disease, Hom said, it is just a matter of time until modern technology catches up with this increasing medical and societal problem. And

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when treatments do become available, it will be even more important to be able to have a definitive diagnosis.

However, it is just as important for families to know what to expect on a day-to-day basis, Hom explained.

For example, the patient with Alzheimer's may forget simple things, like where the bathroom is in someone else's home, even though he or she has been shown over and over. Or a family member may become very frustrated when explaining the same thing day after day to the older person. "It helps families with their anger and frustration if they know the older person's behavior is due to loss of certain kinds of brain function and to be expected," he said.

Patients who are thought to have Alzheimer's, those who have been diagnosed as suffering from multiple strokes, and normal individuals for comparison will be followed at six-month intervals over a five-year period. The study, which looks for loss of various functions in the brain, includes a physical evaluation of the patient, followed by twice-a-year testing. These tests measure a variety of brain-related abilities including IQ, problem solving, abstract thinking and the ability to recognize patterns, spatial and dexterity skills, attention and concentration, language function and long- and short-term memory.

Tests include anything from answering the simplest questions, such as "What is your name?" and "Do you know where you are?" to searching for subtle patterns in a series of pictures. Participants may go from demonstrating their strength of grip to doing math problems. Both standard tests and those specially designed for the project are used.

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All participants must be at least 45 years old--the youngest age that UT Southwestern doctors have treated a patient whom they were sure had Alzheimer's.

The study is being done as part of the \$5-million Alzheimer's Disease Research Center established at UT Southwestern in October 1988. The center is funded by the National Institute on Aging, part of the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

The neuropsychologist, who has been specializing in the study of brain function for a number of years, said that the tests given in the Alzheimer's-stroke study also seem to give indications of other kinds of loss of brain function. These are loss from the long-term use of alcohol, or the presence of brain tumors. He said he would like to explore these subjects in the future.

For further information about the study contact Dr. Jim Hom, the UT Southwestern Department of Psychiatry, (214)688-7100.

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Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.