

News

Office of Medical Information
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****UT Southwestern researchers study childhood depression

DALLAS -- At least 7.5 million American children under 18--an amazing one-fourth of that young population--suffer from mental illness at some time. And a large percentage of these troubled youths suffer from depression, an illness usually associated with adults, said Dr. Graham Emslie, associate professor of psychiatry at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and director of the Psychiatry Department at Children's Medical Center, a UT Southwestern teaching hospital.

Emslie is principal investigator for a five-year study in childhood depression. Newly funded by a \$1.25 million research grant from the National Institutes of Health, the study will look at the effectiveness of the drug fluoxetine (Prozac) in children.

In spite of the magnitude of the problem of depression in children and adolescents--often leading to suicide--little is actually known about how to treat it, Emslie said. Even less is known about the use of anti-depressant drugs with a young population.

"There is a natural resistance to using drugs with depressed children--even in cases of major depression," said Emslie, a nationally recognized expert in pediatric depression. "Because of this resistance there has been little systematic research on who will

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or will not be helped by medication."

The researchers will study 120 depressed patients between the ages of 8 and 18 for eight weeks in a double-blind placebo controlled study. A double-blind placebo study is one in which neither the researcher nor the patient knows which subjects are getting the drug being tested and which are getting a harmless substitute.

"We will be studying whether anti-depressant medication is helpful in treating depression in children and adolescents," said Emslie. The study will also look at certain abnormal sleep patterns to see if they appear in the depressed patient. If they do, they can be used as "markers" for depression. The researchers will also try to identify clinical or biological factors that predict which patients respond to medication or placebo. "To date, there have been no conclusive studies on the effectiveness of anti-depressant medication on children and adolescents," Emslie explained. "If they are effective for some children, then it would be important to determine who responds."

Emslie said that research in child psychiatry is far behind that of most disciplines in medicine. "It's easier to get people to focus on a problem like cerebral palsy, which is far more visible, than on a mental illness," he explained. Recently, however, the National Institute of Mental Health has declared war on childhood mental illness, and grant money for studies such as the childhood depression research project at UT Southwestern and Children's is becoming available.

"Research in children and adolescents needs to occur separately from adult research. Children are not just small adults," said Emslie. "For example, drugs will not always work the same on children

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as adults. Also, there are biological and developmental changes that complicate the picture in young people.

Even so, said Emslie, much can be learned about adult mental illnesses from studying childhood behavioral problems and how they progress.

Other UT Southwestern faculty members collaborating with Emslie on the drug study include: Dr. Warren Weinberg, associate professor of pediatric neurology, who directs the Neurobehavioral Neurology Program at Children's Medical Center; Dr. Howard P. Roffwarg, professor of psychiatry, who heads its sleep research laboratory; Dr. Robert Kowatch, assistant professor of psychiatry; and Dr. A. John Rush, Hay professor of psychiatry and director of the NIH-funded Mental Health Clinical Research Center there.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.