

UT News

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****Sleep activity in the brain may indicate depression relapses, say Dallas researcher at free forum

DALLAS -- The kind of sleep activity going on in the brain of a depressed patient may turn out to be a good indicator of whether or not he or she will relapse after finishing treatment, says a Dallas researcher.

Dr. John Rush says that preliminary indications from an ongoing study, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, point to a strong correlation between patients who show a shortened time of REM sleep and the likelihood of relapse. Rush, who is Betty Jo Hay Professor of Psychiatry at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas, is involved in investigating various ways that physicians can determine which patients with mental and emotional problems can best be helped by what kinds of treatment. His associates in the study are Drs. Donna Giles, Robin Jarrett and Howard Roffwarg. Rush is author of the popular book "Beating Depression."

The question of potential relapse for the depressed person who has completed treatment is only one of the topics to be discussed at a free public forum on the UTHSCD campus Tuesday, Sept. 30. Sponsoring the meeting, which is in Gooch Auditorium at 7:30 p.m., are the health science center and the Dallas Women's Center. An overview of depression, given by Rush, will open the program. Other presentations will be by Dr. Myron Weiner, professor and vice chairman of psychiatry at UTHSCD, on depression and the elderly; Dr. Graham Emslie, assistant professor of psychiatry at UTHSCD, on depression in children and adolescents; and Jarrett, assistant professor of psychiatry, on depression in women.

Rush will also talk about drug therapy, and Jarrett will discuss the psychology of depression. The moderator will be Dr. Lynne Kirk, assistant professor of internal medicine at the health science center. Carol Madison, program specialist for the Mental Health Association of Dallas County and director of its Self-Help Clearinghouse, will introduce the program.

Rush explains that most normal adults have four or five REM (rapid eye movement) episodes during sleep every night. The first REM periods usually occur about 90 minutes after the person falls asleep. While in the REM sleep stage, people are likely to have very vivid dreams with strong images. Their eyes move rapidly and apparently track the visual content of the dream.

(More)

However, tests with sleep electroencephalograms (or sleep EEGs) of many depressed patients show characteristic changes. "During depression, REM sleep comes on much more rapidly and earlier in the night--as quickly as 25 to 60 minutes after falling asleep. This rapid onset of REM sleep may persist even after the depression has lifted," he says.

Because 50 percent to 70 percent of former depression patients suffer relapse, it is important to learn who is at risk. There is no reason to keep people on medication or have them continue expensive psychotherapy if it is not necessary, points out the researcher. However, there are currently no accepted guidelines as to who should continue treatment and who should not. Standard procedure today for drug treatment for depression is to put a patient on medication, usually for six months, then taper off until the drug is completely discontinued and wait to see how that patient does. The standard procedure for patients receiving psychotherapy for depression, or a combination of both, is similar.

"Nowadays, those that relapse, relapse. Those that don't, don't," says Rush, an unhappy solution for either patient or physician.

The psychiatrist says that he is hopeful that further work will help the researchers determine definite guidelines to help predict which patients are in danger of relapse as well as which treatments will work best with individual cases. In the meantime, he is pleased with these early indications that REM activity can predict early relapse.

A second jointly sponsored seminar at UTHSCD will be held on "The Estrogen Controversy" on Tuesday, Oct. 28.

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