

Study is among first in U.S. to show psychotherapy helps schizophrenia

Middle-aged and older people with schizophrenia showed social and cognitive improvements after six months of specialized psychotherapy, reported VA researchers and colleagues in the March issue of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. The study was one of the first in the United States to test psychotherapy for schizophrenia. It was also among the first trials of a therapeutic intervention designed especially for older patients with the disease.

“Despite being ill for decades, these patients were able to learn the new skills taught in our therapy model, and began to think about their unusual beliefs about the world in more realistic ways,” said senior author Dilip V. Jeste, MD, a psychiatrist at the VA San Diego Health Care System and the University of California, San Diego.

The researchers used a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and social skills training (SST). CBT teaches patients to identify and challenge their erroneous and problematic thoughts and beliefs. SST builds skills in hygiene, stress management,

conversation and other areas. The researchers customized the combination therapy to address issues common among aging patients, such as memory loss, disability, and low confidence in their ability to learn new skills.

The study included 76 patients, ages 42 to 74, half of whom received the special psychotherapy. All remained on their antipsychotic medications. These drugs usually help psychiatric symptoms but do not adequately improve social functioning.

After six months, those receiving the psychotherapy were more likely to engage in social activities. The researchers say these improvements may have come about because the CBT helped them reverse negative thoughts such as “I’ll be harmed if I go out,” or “It won’t be fun,” or “I won’t be able to do it.”

The therapy patients also demonstrated better coping skills and more rational thinking, compared to the group receiving only medication.

Psychotherapy is recommended in clinical guidelines for schizophrenia as an adjunct to drugs, based largely on

the results of British studies. But the treatment is often not given, partly due to the perception among healthcare providers that it increases costs without substantial benefits. “Most patients do not receive this recommended intervention, and older patients are even less likely than younger patients to receive it,” said Jeste.

The researcher points out, however, that psychotherapy for schizophrenia may pay for itself in the long run because recipients may tend to spend less time in the hospital and more time at work and social activities. He noted that VA recently allocated funding for enhanced delivery of CBT and other psychosocial interventions for veterans with schizophrenia.

Jeste’s study collaborators, all with VA and UCSD, were lead author Eric Granholm, PhD; John R. McQuaid, PhD; Fauzia Simjee McClure, PhD; Lisa A. Auslander, PhD; Dimitri Perivoliotis, MS; Paola Pedrelli, MA; and Thomas Patterson, PhD.

The study was funded by VA and the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression. ■

VA investigator receives \$14-million NIH grant to expand training

Molly Carnes, MD, MS, director of the Women’s Health Program at the Madison, Wis., VA Medical Center, has received a \$14-million grant from the National Institutes of Health to expand her work in training clinical researchers. Carnes, who also directs the University of Wisconsin Center for Women’s Health Research, will aim to develop multidisciplinary teams of investigators to tackle the nation’s clinical-research agenda, as outlined in NIH’s Roadmap initiative.

The five-year grant, titled “Training and Education to Advance Multidisciplinary Clinical Research,” is one of seven Roadmap training grants issued recently by NIH. The awards are the largest training grants ever given by the agency.

Carnes’ program will build on existing training efforts at her site, such as the Clinical Investigator Preparatory Program and the Women’s Health and Aging Training Program. The new grant will focus on 10 areas of medicine: aging and geriatrics; asthma; cancer; cardiovascular diseases; child and adolescent health; epilepsy; healthcare environment, technology and communication; nutrition and obesity; tobacco and alcohol intervention; and women’s health and underserved populations. The initiative will involve some 72 VA and University of Washington faculty as primary mentors and 100 more as secondary mentors.

To learn more about Carnes’ work visit www.womenshealth.wisc.edu. ■