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NEWS RELEASE

Beating bipolar

Australians 12 to 30 to take part in world-first study to pinpoint causes of bipolar disorder

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the Black Dog Institute will take part in the largest international study of its type to pinpoint the risk factors associated with bipolar disorder.

Around 500 Australians aged 12 to 30 will be recruited to take part in the study, to be conducted in collaboration with four major research institutions in the United States - Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the Universities of Michigan, Indiana and Washington.

Recruitment to the study is scheduled to begin this month.

The study, the most comprehensive of its kind to look at bipolar disorder and its causes, will follow participants who have at least one relative with bipolar disorder **but who are non-sufferers of the illness themselves**. Researchers will look at all the biological factors that may contribute to the illness, including a patient's DNA, brain-imaging, psychological testing, clinical evidence and drug use.

Professor Philip Mitchell, from the Black Dog Institute and Head of UNSW's School of Psychiatry, said 1 in 50 Australians suffers from bipolar disorder, yet there was still no way of identifying a person in the very early stages or who was at high risk.

Professor Mitchell, one of the country's leading bipolar experts, said there was a growing body of evidence that the earlier the treatment, the better the outcome.

"Early identification means early treatment and intervention," he said.

"Current practices to identify people with bipolar disorder are extremely poor.

"It's like diagnosing people with heart disease when they present with a heart attack.

"With bipolar disorder, we know that it can be inherited. We know if you have a relative diagnosed with the disorder you are 14 times more likely to be a sufferer.

"But how do you identify those at risk and what are the subtle first signs of developing the condition? And how do you identify those who are resilient and who will not go onto develop bipolar disorder?"

Professor Mitchell said the nationwide recruitment program would begin this month and would coincide with a similar drive to attract participants in the United States.

“For people with bipolar disorder, initially it will be a matter of getting their kids and siblings assessed,” Professor Mitchell said. “This is potentially only the tip of the iceberg, and the study will also focus on other young people in the target age group as the project gathers momentum.”

The study had the potential to change the way people identified as ‘high risk’ are managed and treated, Professor Mitchell said.

About the study

500 Australians will be recruited into the study. Participants will be followed-up annually for 5 to 10 years.

To participate in the study, individuals must be aged 12 to 30 (inclusive), be **a non-sufferer** of bipolar disorder, but have at least one relative who has been diagnosed with the illness. Each participant will be required to undertake a personal interview, complete questionnaires and provide a blood sample. Some individuals will be invited to undergo a brain scan.

Parents of 12 to 21-year-olds will be asked to complete an interview and questionnaires.

To participate in the study or to obtain more information, phone 1800352 292 or email: bipolar-kidsandsibs@unsw.edu.au

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