

AAP NEWS STORY

29 April 2005

By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent

Severely depressed patients can recover three times faster by adding an anti-psychotic drug to conventional anti-depressants, Australian research has found. Psychiatrist Gordon Parker, executive director of Sydney's Black Dog Institute which researches mood disorders, said anti-psychotic drugs worked like jumper leads to a car battery, kickstarting recovery in some cases of depression.

Professor Parker said patients only taking anti-depressants normally had to wait between two and 20 weeks for the drugs to kick in, causing unnecessary suffering. "Biological depression is one of the most painful things that people can suffer," he said. "Often they're very agitated, they feel tortured in their brain. They just can't fire up, can't even get out of bed to have a bath or shower. They can't concentrate at work. Nothing cheers them up. It's really a horrible state. So it's a relief of suffering to get somebody better from severe depression in a third ... of the time. It's dramatic."

In a pilot study, the University of New South Wales psychiatry professor and colleagues studied 20 patients with major depression in a randomized controlled trial. Half received an anti-psychotic drug plus anti-depressants while the other 10 were treated with anti-depressants and a placebo. Prof Parker said 80 per cent of those on the combined therapy were better within two weeks compared with 40 per cent of the control group. Although anti-psychotics are not yet approved on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) to treat this type of depression, Prof Parker said many psychiatrists were already prescribing the combination therapy for their patients. "Thirty to 40 per cent of people that I now see with a severe melancholic or biological depression can be virtually out of it within a week," he said. "That to my mind is something I never expected in psychiatry. It's actually revolutionised our practice."

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Updated 2 May 2005

Once a patient begins to feel better, Prof Parker takes them off the anti-psychotics, traditionally prescribed to patients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. This restricts their use to a week or two, reducing the possibility of the drugs causing side-effects such as weight gain and fatigue. Prof Parker said he would recommend the combined treatment for patients with severe biological depression rather than for those with reactive depression such as when someone's going through a painful separation

The study was published in the latest edition of the American Journal of Psychiatry. "The only other study that looked at this area in a scientific way was with treatment-resistant patients." Prof Parker said. "This is the first study looking at your average patient with a new or first episode depression."

AAP jhm/jnb/bwl