

AAP NEWS STORY

16 May 2005

MAGNETS MAY QUIETEN VOICES IN SCHIZOPHRENIA PATIENTS

Using magnetic fields to stimulate the brains of schizophrenia patients is showing promise as a way of quietening the voices in their heads, a Sydney psychiatrist says.

Dr Colleen Loo is partway through an Australian pilot study using a non-invasive treatment, known as transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), on people with schizophrenia who experience daily auditory hallucinations. Dr Loo, of the Black Dog Institute, said she hoped to recruit about eight more people for the study.

TMS, which is also being trialled as a treatment for people with severe depression, is delivered via a coil held to a patient's head, allowing psychiatrists to target specific areas of the brain.

"We know from research that looked at the brains of people with schizophrenia who are hearing voices that one of the consistent abnormalities seems to be in the temporal lobe," Dr Loo said. "That's the part that processes language, speech and hearing. One of the theories of why people hear voices is that there's an over-activity in the part of the brain generating the voices. We're using TMS to try and reduce that activity."

Dr Loo said previous international studies had focused on the left temporal lobe in schizophrenia patients, giving mixed results, but her research was looking at both sides of the brain.

"If you look at studies of brain functioning, sometimes the abnormality's on the left, sometimes on the right so we're looking at both," she said. "We're stimulating three different areas of the brain of each person in the study to see which one they respond best to and then giving them up to six weeks of TMS at that site."

Dr Loo said so far, results had been encouraging but more research was needed before TMS could be considered an effective treatment for schizophrenia patients.

People wanting to take part in the study should phone the institute's research team on 02 9382 3720. Participants can be of any age but need to be experience frequent auditory hallucinations. They will not be required to go off their normal anti-psychotic drugs for the study.

<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/newsdesk/index.cfm>

Updated 18 May05

"Most of these people will have taken quite a few different medications over the years but just haven't been able to get rid of their voices," said Dr Loo, a senior research fellow at the University of NSW.

TMS is relatively free of side effects, although some people say they feel uncomfortable at the time of stimulation and about a third suffer from mild headaches afterwards.

Schizophrenia affects about one in 100 Australians.

- By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent