



NEW TREATMENT FOR BIPOLAR II SUFFERERS

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A groundbreaking Australian study has found a new strategy that reduces the severity of depression for Bipolar II sufferers.

With increasing numbers of people being diagnosed with Bipolar II – estimated to be as high as one in 20 Australians over their lifetime - the results of the study has been described as “potentially signalling one of the most significant medical advances in many years in the treatment of a mental illness”

The Sydney based Black Dog Institute conducted the study – details of which appear in the latest edition of the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

Professor Gordon Parker, Executive Director of the Black Dog Institute, said today the study had been conducted over a nine-month period using an SSRI antidepressant and exploring the hypothesis that drugs of this class were actually mood stabilisers.

“Previously, concerns had been expressed about the possibility of antidepressant drugs, such as SSRIs (known as the new generation of antidepressants), causing “switching” (being induced into a ‘high’) if taken by a person with Bipolar Disorder,” Professor Parker said. For such reasons, clinicians would not have trialled or been encouraged to consider such an approach.

“During the study, participants taking the SSRI had a significant reduction in depression severity, percentage of days depressed or high and percentage of days impaired,” the Professor reported.

These were people recruited from the general community – participants being eligible if they were 18 to 65 years of age, had a minimum two-year history of depressive and hypomanic episodes, and had mood episodes (either hypomanic or depressive) occurring at least monthly.

To avoid the risk of biases emerging from a person’s previous exposure to medication and for ethical reasons, the study excluded subjects who had previously received antidepressant, mood stabilising or neuroleptic medication.

The study was limited to 10 patients who were monitored without any medication for three months, then received the drug or placebo for three months, and the converse for the final three months. This is the first study examining if SSRI medication is a mood stabiliser for Bipolar II Disorder.

Given the small sample size, Professor Parker said there was a need to conduct a larger study. However, these initial findings had found preliminary support for the potential use of SSRIs in managing Bipolar II Disorder and showed “clear improvements in depression and impairment and some suggested benefit for hypomania.”

“Results from the proof of concept study are extremely encouraging. We are now looking to conduct a broader international study which may also have implications for Bipolar I sufferers,” according to Professor Parker. Current guidelines recommend formal mood stabilisers for Bipolar Disorder, with many such drugs having quite significant side-effects and requiring close monitoring. The possibility of SSRIs assisting many with Bipolar II offers a potential step short of using such demanding medication.

A copy of the study appears on the Black Dog Institute website – blackdoginstitute.org.au

Other information on the website on Bipolar Disorder is the most extensive in Australia.

EXPLANATION- DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN BIPOLAR I AND BIPOLAR II

Bipolar I Disorder is the more severe disorder – with individuals being more likely to experience mania, have longer ‘highs’, or be more likely to have psychotic experiences and be more likely to be hospitalised.

Bipolar II Disorder is defined as being less severe, with no psychotic experiences and with episodes tending to last only hours to a few days; a person experiences episodes of both hypomania and depression but no manic episodes and the severity of the ‘highs’ does not lead to hospitalisation.

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