

NEWS RELEASE

20 June 2008

TRACKER SYSTEM TO HELP MANAGE MENTAL HEALTH

Mobile phones and the internet will soon be used to help up to two million Australians manage their mental health problems.

The innovative approach is designed to help people track their wellbeing on a day-to-day basis in areas including mood, sleep, activities, medication, physical activity as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

The target groups are adolescents and adults at risk of developing depression, anxiety or stress, as well as those with existing conditions.

A \$1.88 million Federal Government grant has been awarded to the Black Dog Institute and the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to undertake the program between 2008-2011.

Senior Research Fellow at the Black Dog Institute and the School of Psychiatry at the University of New South Wales, Dr Judy Proudfoot, said the first stage in the program would be the internet version followed by use of the mobile phone platform.

Information is fed back to the users on how they are going and alerts are sent when things aren't going well, along with links to appropriate self-help tools," says Dr Proudfoot.

Most mental health programs, whether they are delivered face-to-face, by phone or via the web, rely on people monitoring their symptoms or activities.

Dr Proudfoot said quite often an individual's recall of symptoms, mood or behaviour over several days or weeks can be poor which not only affects the accuracy of their reporting but the medical response.

"The Black Dog Institute Tracker System is an important initiative that allows 'just-in-time' monitoring. If a patient reports that he or she has been feeling anxious and not sleeping well, they would receive an alert pointing to tools for managing anxiety and giving tips for sleeping better."

"The alert may also recommend discussing the issues with a GP or clinician."

Dr Proudfoot said there is evidence to show that not everyone with a mental health disorder consults a doctor or mental health service for their problem.

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“In fact, research indicates the number of people consulting a doctor is as low as 35 percent in cases of mental illness,” says Dr Proudfoot. “At the same time, many people report they do not see the need to consult a doctor, preferring instead to manage the condition themselves. Self-monitoring is a critical component of self-management.”

“On the other hand, many people do consult a clinician, and self-monitoring is an important part of their treatment. The system will allow people to print off reports so they can take them to their clinician.”

Dr Proudfoot said the tracker system was designed to suit people of differing ages and levels of electronic literacy.

“As we know, Australia’s mobile phone penetration has surpassed natural saturation, with every Australian who can use one. Mobile phones are typically carried on the person and are usually turned on, which facilitates the collection of self-monitoring information as people go about their everyday activities,” Dr Proudfoot said.

“Such applications are easy to deliver to large numbers of people, they can include time-sensitive prompts via SMS for users to input their information and they are location independent.

“At the same time mobile phone use is not restricted by socio-economic status and is the preferred means of communication among adolescents (18 to 24 years) who represent 27 percent of people affected by mental illness,” Dr Proudfoot said.

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