

Not disposed for depression?

VCU helping determine if Chinese women prone to risks for mental illness

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Virginia Commonwealth University is collaborating on a study of major depression in Chinese women in a search for genetic risks for mental illness.

Previous research has indicated that genes play a role in depression, which is more common in women than in men.

Depression, however, is uncommon in China. One study indicates the rate is about 4 percent, less than half that in the United States. Recent research, however, suggests that it is increasingly recognized as a problem as China becomes more westernized, said Dr. Kenneth Kendler, the behavioral geneticist leading VCU's role in the international collaboration.

"Depression as we understand it in western terms is very rare within China," Kendler said. The Chinese tend to focus on depression's physical symptoms rather than its effect on behavior and mood, but the psychiatric view of depression is becoming more recognized in China's urban areas, he said.

Doctors from Shanghai's Fudan University will conduct the study in collaboration with genetic researchers at Oxford University and VCU. The two-year, \$100,000 study is funded by the private, nonprofit National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression.

The study will involve 1,000 Chinese women 35 and older who have had recurring depression and 1,000 who have not experienced the mental illness.

To participate in the study, all four of a woman's grandparents must be Han Chinese, who make up more than 90 percent of their country's population. This genetic similarity will help scientists spot the inherited variations that might increase the risk for depression, Kendler said.

A strong genetic component does not inevitably lead to disease. Vulnerability to depression appears to result from the influence of multiple genes acting together with environmental factors, such as substance abuse or how a person reacts to relationships.

The researchers' goal also will be helped by the very low rate of drug and alcohol use among older Chinese women, Kendler said.

"We can eliminate the problem that in studying people who have both depression and alcohol and drug use, you can't really distinguish between the depression . . . due to their own genes versus the depression that might arise just from the drug and alcohol use," Kendler said.

VCU will conduct the statistical analysis of the data gathered by the Chinese physicians. The Richmond school recently hosted a workshop with the study's Shanghai partners to train them to conduct standardized patient interviews and to teach others how to conduct the interviews.

"We will take these new skills and techniques to share with our colleagues in China," Dr. Shen Xun Shi, director of psychiatry of Fudan University's Huashan Hospital, said in a statement from VCU.

Kendler and VCU colleague Lisa Halberstadt will travel to Shanghai in November to assist in training doctors to evaluate patients for depression and begin the study, which will involve 10 health centers.

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