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656

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European mental health project targets biological roots of social withdrawal

By Emily Underwood | Apr. 12, 2016, 7:15 PM

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Withdrawal from friends, family, and colleagues is of the most painful and debilitating symptoms of major depression. It is also an early sign of diseases such as schizophrenia and Alzheimer's. Today, a large coalition of European researchers and pharmaceutical companies announced a new €16.5 million research initiative, aimed at determining whether the social withdrawal in such disorders has a common biological cause.

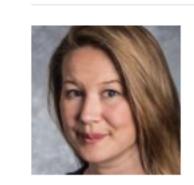
"Inappropriate social integration is a common, but neglected, facet of the majority of neuropsychiatric disorders," says neuroscientist Martien Kas of Utrecht University in the Netherlands, and coordinator of the new Psychiatric Ratings using Intermediate Stratified Markers (PRISM) project, funded by the European Innovative Medicines Initiative. Using measures such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, electroencephalograms, and blood tests, as well as smartphone apps to track social behavior, PRISM will compare groups of people with Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, and major depressive disorder to determine which biological factors correlate with social withdrawal in the different groups and look for common factors.

The approach is similar to the Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) framework recently put forth by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which which tries to identify "core behavioral phenotypes" across different psychiatric conditions, and identify specific neurobiological pathways underlying those behaviors, says Marina Picciotto, a neuroscientist at Yale University. Championed by former NIMH Director Tom Insel, who is now heading Google's smartphone-based mental health research program, RDoC's vision of identifying specific biological markers for those behaviors and using such information to develop personalized treatments for individuals "is gaining traction," she says.

The focus on social withdrawal is "very interesting, as this is a key unmet need in a variety of psychiatric and neurodegenerative diseases and in aging in general," says neuroscientist John Cryan of the University College Cork in Ireland. Most exciting, he says, is that the project appears to be a "seamless" collaboration between industry and academia, signaling the growing realization that both must work side by side to accelerate the glacially slow pace of drug discovery for neurological and psychiatric diseases.

"Right now in psychiatry we don't think about the brain at all when we are making a diagnosis or planning a treatment," says Leanne Williams of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. "It's time we did. The PRISM study will be an important step in this direction."

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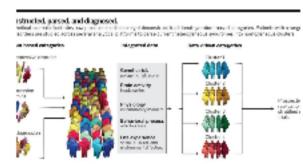


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