European mental health project targets biological roots of social withdrawal

By Emily Underwood | Last updated: 7 July, 2013 7:18 PM

Withdrawn from friends, family, and colleagues is one of the most painful and debilitating symptoms of major depression.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 an EU 145 million research initiative aimed at determining whether the social withdrawal in such disorders has a common biological cause.

“Disappearing social integration is a common, but neglected, feature of the majority of major depressive disorders,” says neuroscience of the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and co-founder of the new network’s co-founder, Martin van den Belt. "Involvement in the new network’s network of major centres for depression research, will allow us to explore the biological and technical roots of social withdrawal in the different groups and for common features."

The approach is similar to the Research Domain Criteria (RDoC) framework recently put forth by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which aims to create a "data-driven approach to the behavioral phenotypes" across different psychiatric disorders, and identify specific neuroscientific tools and methodologies utilizing those disorders. Dr. Martin van den Belt from the Netherlands says, "For depression, it also involves the biological roots of the disease and how to use such information to develop personalized treatments for depression." "A key piece of the puzzle is identifying which psychological factors are the most important," the study lead author, Dr. van den Belt says. "This means we have to understand how depression interacts with other diseases and how to develop personalized treatments for depression."

"Right now in the United States we are making a diagnosis or planning a treatment" says Laurens W. van den Belt of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, "It’s time we did. The PREMISE study will be an important step in this direction."

Emily Underwood
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