

Australian Research Identifies Patients at Risk for Mental Health Problems After Injury

Up to 400,000 Australians are severely injured in a car, workplace accident or violent assault annually – over 25% will go on to develop a mental health disorder such as posttraumatic stress disorder or depression.

While the health system is geared to helping injury survivors recover physically from such as an event, there is little focus on the emotional impact of experiencing a traumatic injury.

A world first predictive screening test (just published in a leading US psychological journal) has been developed by Melbourne scientists. The test allows health care workers to determine which patients are at risk for developing mental health problems after severe injury. The screen development was lead by Dr Meaghan O'Donnell, at the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) and the National Trauma Research Institute (NTRI), in collaboration with doctors from the Alfred and Royal Melbourne Hospitals, the Universities of New South Wales, Adelaide, and Melbourne.

The study is part of an ongoing Traumatic Injury Research Program which has been conducted by the ACPMH since 1999.

The Traumatic Injury Research Program has conducted large scale, national studies and have identified that up to 25% of people experiencing a traumatic injury will develop a new psychiatric disorder in the 12 months after injury. Posttraumatic stress disorder, other anxiety disorders and depression are the most common problems to occur.

People admitted to hospital with a serious injury often face a long, painful and stressful road to recovery. Not only do they have to deal with the trauma of going through a life-threatening event, but they also have to deal with pain, uncertainty about their future health, disability and potential financial difficulties. The whole new set of problems they may face once they are discharged from hospital can create high levels of stress. They may face weeks of rehabilitation or not be able to return to work immediately.

Psychological recovery is as important as physical recovery, yet most people with traumatic injuries who develop mental health problems do not seek professional help for their problems.

In the latest edition of the ***Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology***, Dr O'Donnell and her colleagues show that it is possible to identify which injury patients are at risk of developing the serious mental health disorders -posttraumatic stress disorder and depression. This is particularly important because often it is only after patients are discharged from the hospital that they start to experience high levels of anxiety or depression. With this simple screen, patients complete 10 questions, and their score tells doctors or nurses whether patients are highly likely to develop mental health problems. These patients can then be monitored in the community and mental health interventions can be offered if patients do start to develop problems.

This study is an important step forward in helping patients recover emotionally from their traumatic injury.

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