



MENTAL HEALTH

Major areas of focus for VA research on mental health include substance use disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, adjustment and anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. Researchers are seeking biomarkers for diagnosis and treatment, studying and testing new drug therapies, and improving access to mental health care through telehealth and other innovative approaches.

EXAMPLES OF VA RESEARCH ADVANCES

ELECTRONIC MESSAGING IMPROVES HEALTH—A home electronic messaging program reduced ER visits and hospitalizations in people with mental health issues. West Haven, Conn., VA researchers studied the effects of the program, which was established by the VA Connecticut Healthcare System in 2007. During the first two years, 76 people received a home messaging device, which connected to a telephone line. The device provided daily messages and asked for patient feedback, based on disease management protocols. A nurse practitioner received and analyzed responses. Between the six-month period before the program began and the first six months of the program, hospital admissions dropped by 80 percent and ER admissions by 60 percent. The patients in the study, who had depression, substance-use disorders, schizophrenia, or posttraumatic stress disorder, were highly satisfied with the program.

GENE, BRAIN DIFFERENCES IN SCHIZOPHRENIA—Bronx, N.Y., VA researchers, along with colleagues in the United States, England, and Greece, have discovered genetic differences in people with schizophrenia that are reflected in their brain tissue. The group compared gene and protein expression in postmortem brain samples of people with and without schizophrenia. Those with schizophrenia had certain underactive genes, which were associated with the nodes of Ranvier. These are gaps between neurons that help to conduct nerve impulses. The findings suggest that the underactive genes and resulting abnormalities in the nodes of Ranvier are associated with the symptoms and signs of schizophrenia.

MORE ATTENTION FOR PANIC DISORDER—Panic disorder is relatively common in Veterans and requires increased attention and treatment, says a Charleston, S.C., group of VA researchers. They reviewed information on 884 Veterans who visited primary-care clinics at four VA medical centers. Just over 8 percent of the Veterans met diagnostic criteria for panic disorder. Compared with other Veterans, this group reported more pain, worse general health, more mental health impairment, and more problems with social functioning. Many of the Veterans with panic disorder also met the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder.

★ **FACTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH**—*Mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety are common in the United States, with more than a quarter of Americans suffering from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. Mental health is a major focus for VA's healthcare system. A recent health survey of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans enrolled in VA health care found that nearly 40 percent had at least one mental health diagnosis. Posttraumatic stress disorder was the most common, followed by depression. In addition to deployment-related mental health problems, schizophrenia is a major focus of VA clinical care and research, affecting some 100,000 VA patients and accounting for nearly 12 percent of VA's total health care costs.*