

UC San Diego Health Joins Leading National Network Targeting Depressive Illnesses

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UC San Diego Health has been designated a member of the National Network of Depression Centers (NNDC), a consortium of leading academic medical centers working to accelerate research, education and improved treatment options for people with depressive and bipolar illnesses. UC San Diego Health joins 22 other institutions in the nationwide nonprofit network.

“We are honored and excited to become part of this network,” said Igor Grant, MD, chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine. “Our acceptance into this cutting-edge group will enable us to work more closely with other institutions that share our passion and commitment for giving patients the best care and the latest treatment options.”

The NNDC, founded in 2008, works to harness the collective power and resources of network members to expedite scientific discovery and advances in patient care for people with depressive and bipolar illnesses, also known as mood disorders. Its membership includes many of the nation’s top medical institutions. Acceptance involves a rigorous application process detailing high-levels of expertise in clinical delivery, research and education.

Pat Rinvelt, NNDC executive director, said UC San Diego Health is a welcome addition to the group. “By uniting with the collaborative members of the NNDC, UC San Diego’s impact will be amplified by the network, strengthening both, and accelerating the important work being done in the field of mood disorders.”

UC San Diego Health’s psychiatric care program includes both clinic-based and hospital-based services for adults and seniors, along with a nationally recognized research program.

“UC San Diego is known for its comprehensive approach encompassing a broad spectrum of psychiatric disorders,” said Grant, Distinguished Professor Psychiatry. “We have specialized programs in many areas, including maternal mental health, eating disorders, geriatric psychiatry, HIV neurobiology, substance abuse and treatment-resistant depression, which includes access to innovative treatment options, such as ketamine infusion therapy and transcranial magnetic

stimulation." UC San Diego Health also operates an integrated mood disorders clinic at the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System.

"Mood disorders can occur at any time in a person's life," said Grant. "They can strike children, adolescents, young adults, older people, and they can be devastating." Approximately 9.5 percent of the U.S. population suffers from a mood disorder in a given year, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

UC San Diego School of Medicine researchers are conducting numerous studies to advance understanding and development of new treatments for mood disorders and other psychiatric issues. "We have an extensive research program spanning from basic studies in circadian rhythms to cognitive therapy research to exploring possible genetic contributions to psychiatric diseases," said Grant.

Among these projects are stem cell and gene studies led by John Kelsoe, MD, professor of psychiatry in the UC San Diego School of Medicine. "Stem cell technology is a revolution in the study of psychiatric illnesses," said Kelsoe, who also heads the Veterans Affairs Mood Disorders clinic. "Dramatic breakthroughs in our understanding of the fundamental causes of mood disorders are emerging rapidly in this field. It is also a perfect fit with our ongoing program of whole genome sequencing, which is exploring the role of genes in many major psychiatric disorders."

The department's research program makes the NNDC's collaborative opportunities particularly exciting. "We can do things as a group that wouldn't be so easy for one institution to do on its own," Grant said. For example, he cited compiling data on the genetic aspects of mood disorders. "You need data on thousands of patients to discern patterns. By combining the data and resources of network members, we can accelerate understanding of the genetic contributions to these diseases."

Rinvelt said the NNDC's newly launched Mood Outcomes program will help to facilitate this process by combining both a clinical care program with research programs addressing depression and bipolar illnesses.

John Greden, MD, the founder and executive director of the University of Michigan Comprehensive Depression Center and the founding chair of the NNDC, said the network is delighted that UC San Diego Health is now a member. Other NNDC members include Duke University, Stanford University, Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins Medical School and other prestigious institutions from around the country. "As demonstrated by cardiovascular, cancer and diabetes networks, longitudinal 'big data,' collaborations among Centers of Excellence are essential for producing genuine breakthroughs," said Greden. "We are on the way, and UC San Diego's excellent team will contribute to the NNDC's goals of developing the right treatments for the right patients at the right time."

The NNDC brings together experts who pursue initiatives in education, research, clinical care delivery and community outreach; engage in interdisciplinary collaborations both within their home institution and across the network, and identify opportunities for multi-site studies and emerging partnerships.

Another major role for NNDC is to lift the stigma associated with mental illness. Grant sees this as a critical goal. "The stigma is starting to lift, but it's still pervasive," he said, noting the different societal responses to illness. "If there was a presidential candidate who received treatment for a stomach ulcer, people wouldn't think anything about it. But if it was for depression, he'd lose some popularity points. I think it shows we still have a long way to go."

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