

UC-San Diego Receives \$10 Million NIH Grant for Joint Mental Health Project with County of San Diego

October 02, 2007 |

Five-year Grant Will Fund First Center of its Kind in the U.S.; Benefit Middle-Aged and Older People with Serious Mental Illnesses

The University of California, San Diego School of Medicine has received a five-year, \$10 million grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), to work with the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency's (HHSA) Mental Health Services division and other community partners to improve the quality of life of middle-age and older people with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders.

"We need to dispel the notion that older people with mental illness can't be helped," said project director Dilip V. Jeste, M.D. "The question 'why bother?' is one we can answer."

The funding will be used to establish the first and, to date, the only Advanced Center of Innovation in Services and Intervention Research (ACISIR) in the country. UC San Diego will partner with HHSA's Mental Health Services, as well as with the Veterans Affairs San Diego Healthcare System and the local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) – the largest mental health advocacy group in the country – comprised of people suffering from mental illnesses and their families.

"The new Center will allow us to find optimal ways to treat older people with serious mental illnesses in our community," said Jeste. "Severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and the psychosis of Alzheimer's disease, are common and disabling in older people, and there is a critical need for studies of treatments and service for these patients. As researchers, we need to go where the patients are and try to improve treatments in the real world."

Jeste, one of the foremost leaders in the field of geriatric psychiatry and psychosis, holds the Estelle and Edgar Levi Chair in Aging at UC San Diego and he is director of the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging, and Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences at UCSD.

“This exciting partnership will allow us to bring to San Diego the latest innovations in the delivery of mental health care for adults and older adults,” said Piedad Garcia, Ed.D., L.C.S.W., Director of Systems of Care with HHSAs Adult and Older Adult Mental Health Services. “The collaborative research will allow for the development of interventions to better serve the Latino community and the homeless mentally ill population.”

HHSAs Adult and Older Adult Mental Health Services division provides public-supported mental health services for about 40,000 San Diegans over age 18 each year. For HHSAs patients over age 45, 68 percent are Caucasian; the remaining 32 percent are Latino, African American and other or unknown.

“Building and maintaining academic-public collaborations is essential for improving mental health care for older adults with schizophrenia and other psychoses,” said Thomas Insel, M.D., Director of NIMH. “The strength of this new Center is that it builds upon an already existing collaborative research partnership in the community, led by a capable, committed, and productive team of investigators at UCSD.”

The mission of the new ACISIR is to better serve middle-aged and older persons with serious mental illness by bringing the results of academic research to practice in the community. Three major areas to be addressed are:

- 1) Optimizing the use of medications in patients with psychotic disorders;
- 2) Enhancing patients’ recovery through interventions such as cognitive behavior therapy and job training; and
- 3) Developing and adapting methods for assessing the needs of and improving care for underserved groups, such as homeless and Hispanic populations.

“How can we best implement important research findings? Who will do it? How can we make it practical for health-care providers to assess mental health care needs and treat people? These are the important questions we will work together to address,” said Jeste.

Other key investigators in the Center include Sally Shepherd, M.N., National Alliance on Mental Illness; Barton Palmer, Ph.D., Thomas Patterson, Ph.D., Barry Lebowitz, Ph.D., Gregory Aarons, Ph.D., and Shahrokh Golshan, Ph.D., UC-San Diego Department of Psychiatry; Sidney Zisook, M.D., Laurie Lindamer, Ph.D., David Folsom, M.D., M.P.H., and Eric Granholm, Ph.D., UC-San Diego and VA San Diego Healthcare System; Concepcion Barrio, Ph.D., and Lawrence Palinkas, Ph.D., University of Southern California; William Hawthorne, Ph.D., Community Research Foundation; and Jennifer Schaffer, Ph.D., and Alfredo Aguirre, L.C.S.W., San Diego County Adult and Older Adult Mental Health Services.

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