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Rapid Cycling Bipolar Patients Have More Severe Disease

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June 16, 2003 (Pittsburgh) — Rapid cycling bipolar patients have more severe symptoms than non-rapid cycling bipolar patients, according to a new study.

Christopher Schneck, MD, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center (UCHSC) in Denver and medical director of Colorado Psychiatric Hospital's Psychiatric Acute Care Service, presented the data here at the Fifth International Conference on Bipolar Disorders.

"Part of the problem is that we don't know who these people are," Dr. Schneck told Medscape in an interview, stressing the importance of having a way to profile these patients more effectively. "We may be potentially giving them treatments, mainly antidepressants, which in the long run are not going to be beneficial to them," he said.

Demographic, histological, and symptomatic features were measured in a cross-sectional sample of 500 rapid cycling and non-rapid cycling bipolar patients with either bipolar I or bipolar II disorder. Rapid cycling patients made up 20% of the study group.

Results showed that rapid cycling patients were more likely to be female, a fact more evident in bipolar I than bipolar II patients. Rapid cycling patients also showed a younger age of onset and a higher occurrence of depression at study entry. In the year prior to the study, the rapid cycling group showed poorer global functioning and a significantly greater rate of depressive and hypomanic/manic episodes. History of psychosis showed no correlation with rapid cycling but bipolar I patients were more likely to have symptoms of psychosis than bipolar II patients.

"[Rapid cycling] is a very important problem," said G. Leon Reid, PhD, president of Goal Opportunities Private Psychological Service in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a group not involved with the study, in an interview with Medscape. "Five percent of all bipolars are rapid cycling. These people cannot really go by a set schedule. They vary in their reliability, in their job [performance] because of the cycling. So unless the cycling can be curtailed, they are going to be unemployable. And then they'll be a burden on their families and society," said Dr. Reid.

"If we can identify these people early and institute good treatments, we may, in the long run, really help the course of the illness," said Dr. Schneck.

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