

Panic attacks often confused with other medical issues

Monday, 08 December 2008

HOUSTON -- The symptoms of panic attacks are frequently confused by physicians with other problems, indicating a need for better education in the area, said researchers at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, who surveyed physicians on the topic. A report of their study appears in the online version of the Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings.

"Because symptoms of panic attacks can be confused with those of other medical problems related to the heart and gastrointestinal tract as well as neurological problems, a lack of knowledge about panic attacks can lead to unnecessary referrals and tests," said Dr. Ellen Teng, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at BCM and clinical research psychologist at the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

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Survey responses

Researchers evaluated 95 surveys received from cardiologists, gastroenterologists and neurologists in the Houston area. The survey questions included information about those most at risk for panic attacks and treatment options.

The physicians answered only half of the survey questions about panic attacks correctly. There was no difference in knowledge among the three specialty groups.

While 94 percent recognized medication as a way to treat panic and anxiety symptoms, only about 30 percent recognized cognitive behavioral therapy to educate patients about panic attacks and their symptoms and give them tools to deal with the problem as the treatment of choice.

Long-term treatment

"Medication does treat the short-term aspects of panic attacks such as shortness of breath and a racing heart, but cognitive behavioral therapy treats panic disorder in the long-term," said Teng.

Only slightly more than half of the physicians surveyed believed that psychologists could treat panic attacks directly and effectively through this technique.

Teng called for increased awareness of panic disorder among physicians. Teng also recommends providing resources and literature for physicians to make appropriate referrals to psychologists.

Full Article: <http://www.bcm.edu/news/item.cfm?newsID=1267>

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