Physical and mental wellbeing: A program for the long term rehabilitation of psychiatric patients

Associate Professor Dafna Merom from the School of Science and Health (SSH), with the collaboration of Professor Andrew Page from the School of Medicine, Dr Donna Giles from Cumberland Hospital and Professor Gregory Kolt, Dean of SSH have been granted funding from Western Sydney Partners in Recovery to trial an exercise and healthy eating program in mental health rehabilitation units. The researchers will work with staff and patients who are at the sub-acute stage of their mental illness and undergoing rehabilitation in Cumberland Hospital, Westmead NSW. The program aims to reduce the cardio-metabolic risk in this population by introducing lifestyles change early in rehabilitation.

‘Australians suffering from a mental illness are at high risk of physical health complications, in particular the “metabolic syndrome”’, Associate Professor Merom explains. ‘This condition is accentuated by the side effects of antipsychotic medications, and seriously undermines these individuals’ self-sufficiency.’ This research project will attempt to introduce lifelong skills for increasing physical activity levels and introducing healthy eating into an existing psychiatric treatment program run at Cumberland Hospital, and will involve WSU students trained in the Physical Activity Laboratory (PAL) at the SSH.

The program consists of three stages: Assess, Advise and Assist (3A’s). In the Assess Stage a trained PAL member will visit rehabilitation units at Cumberland Hospital to assess the physical activity status of patients in the unit using activity monitors (accelerometers). The Advice Stage will be led by health promotion students who will advise participants how to build their own physical activity plans (e.g. daily steps goals), healthy diet goals (e.g. replacement of unhealthy snacks) and offer advice to family and friends so that they can support the individual following discharge. The Assist Stage will provide patients the opportunity to take part in daily physical activity program led by UWS students including walking, Zumba, swimming conditioning classes and sports. Finally, following patient discharge they will be evaluated for mental and physical wellbeing.

It is hoped that the program will equip patients with the skills needed to maintain a healthy weight and active lifestyle into the future. It aims to ease the costs of healthcare in Australia by promoting health habits that minimise the risk of long term chronic conditions that accompany mental illness.

Project Title: PAL@Rehabilitation  
Funding has been set at: $98,652  
Contact Details: d.merom@westernsydney.edu.au; http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ssh  
September 2015

Supported by: