Serious Mental Illness and Addiction in Newly Diagnosed

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A significant percentage of newly infected and diagnosed HIV-positive people had a history of serious mental illness and alcohol and drug problems, according to a small San Diego-based study presented at the 2007 National HIV Prevention Conference in Atlanta.

J. Hampton Atkinson, MD, of the University of California, San Diego, and his colleagues recruited 26 people, all of whom were newly infected and diagnosed, into a study to examine their psychological well-being and past psychiatric history.

Although the percentage of those in the study who were experiencing major depression at the time of diagnosis was higher than in the general population, it was not outside the range typically seen in people with HIV. Participants' responses to a mood measurement tool indicated that 11 percent were experiencing mild depression and 36 percent anxiety at the time of their HIV diagnosis.

When researchers examined their medical and psychiatric history, however, there was a significant minority who reported a history of serious psychological problems. Of note, 30 percent of the patients reported a history of suicide attempt at some point during their lives.

Fifty-four percent of the study participants reported alcohol abuse or dependence at some point in their lives, and 35 percent reported such problems during the previous 12 months. Similarly, 46 percent reported a history of non-alcohol substance use at some point in their lives, and 35 percent reported this problem during the previous 12 months.

Though the study is fairly small, Dr. Atkinson did suggest that some people at high risk for HIV infection may require intensive interventions to treat underlying substance abuse and severe mental health problems.

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