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SCHIZOPHRENIA: FACTS AND MYTHS

Schizophrenia is a term first used in 1908 by a psychiatrist from Switzerland named Eugen Bleuler. Schizophrenia is derived from the Greek “schizo” (split) and “phren” (mind). People often mistakenly think that schizophrenia is therefore an illness where people have two minds or personalities. In reality, this ‘splitting of the mind’ refers to a split between thought content, emotion and behaviour. Schizophrenia is a chronic illness that affects approximately one in a hundred people. It typically begins in the third decade of life but can affect people of any age.

MYTHS

Patients sometimes think schizophrenia is caused by illicit

drugs. While using illicit drugs may be a trigger for schizophrenia or contribute to a relapse of symptoms, many people who develop schizophrenia have never used illicit drugs. Schizophrenia may have risk factors such as a hereditary component or exposure to trauma at an early age, however most people may have these risk factors and never develop schizophrenia. Families will often wonder why a relative developed schizophrenia but in truth there was nothing that could have been done to prevent it. Schizophrenia is an illness that may happen to anyone from any walk of life.

Patients also often think of people seeing or hearing things that are not there when they think of schizophrenia. Although

this may be one symptom, hallucinations are neither the only symptom of schizophrenia nor are they exclusive to schizophrenia. Hallucinations may occur due to intoxication, other psychiatric illnesses and medical illnesses such as delirium. Schizophrenia therefore needs to be diagnosed by a medical professional and anyone who has hallucinations for the first time should be assessed by a medical professional as soon as possible.

Symptoms of schizophrenia can be grouped into two broad categories, namely positive and negative symptoms. Most people are more familiar with the positive symptoms of schizophrenia, which include hallucinations; delusions (a fixed false belief

where people believe something that's out of keeping with reality) and disorganised thoughts, speech and behaviour. The negative symptoms of schizophrenia are however just as important and may take longer to treat than the positive symptoms. Negative doesn't mean bad but rather that there's a reduction in ability to do certain things. Negative symptoms may include difficulties with social functioning, lack of motivation (with subsequent difficulties with work or self-care) and reduced display of emotions. There may be some difficulties with cognition, such as concentration problems or insight into the person's illness. Some people with schizophrenia may also have slow speech or movement, which may be due to the illness itself or side effects from medication.

MEDS AND LIFESTYLE

There are also a lot of misperceptions about medication used to treat schizophrenia. Since the symptoms of schizophrenia are caused by abnormal levels of brain chemicals (such as the neurotransmitter dopamine), medication is needed to treat these imbalances in brain chemistry.

Treating schizophrenia requires medication but may also include counselling, occupational therapy and healthy lifestyle choices. While diet and exercise, stress management and generally leading a healthy lifestyle is also vital in treating mental illness, it's not enough to treat schizophrenia alone and should be used together with medication.

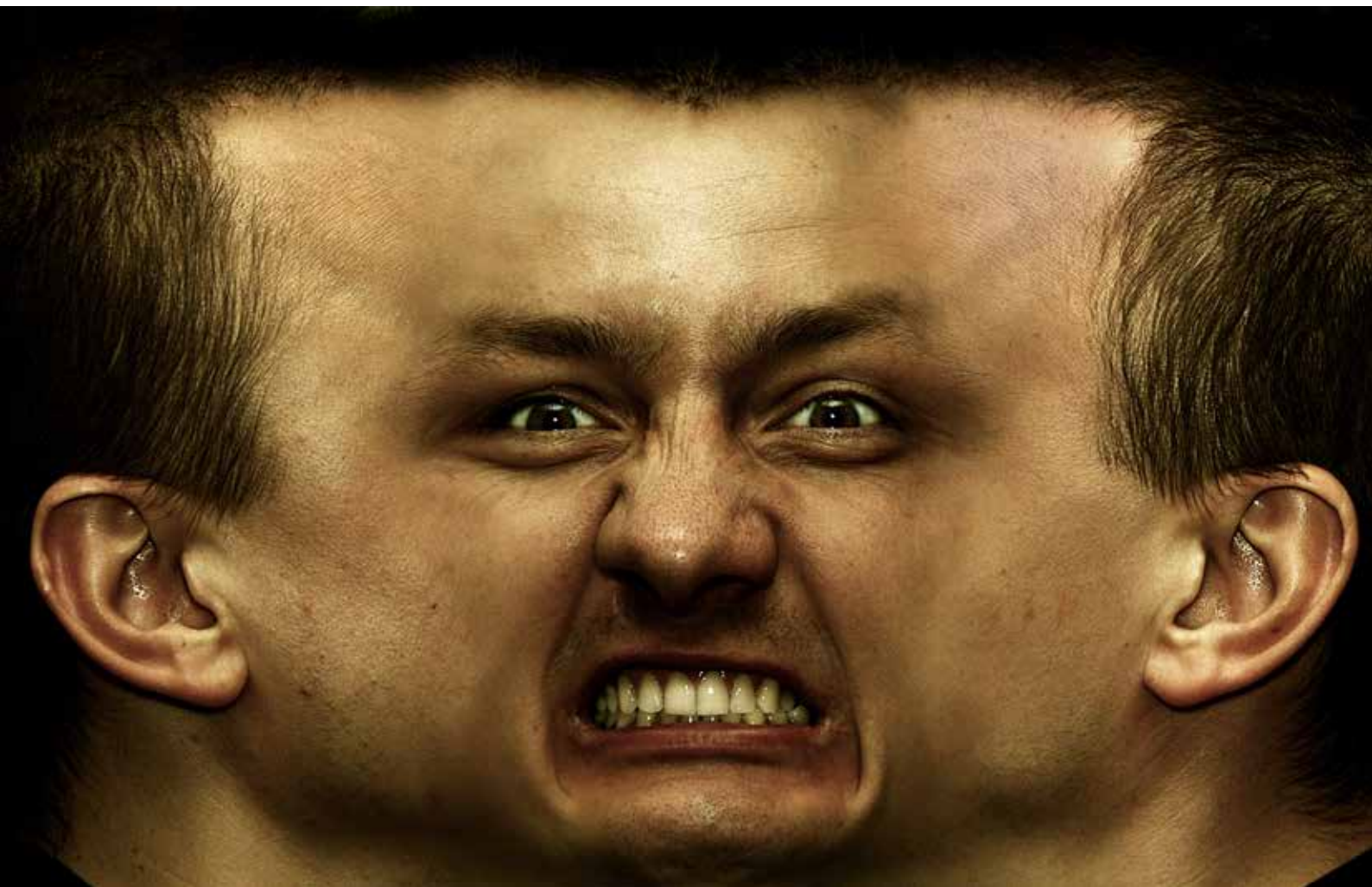
Patients will sometimes ask if the medication used to treat schizophrenia is addictive. Sometimes benzodiazepines are used as a calming and sleeping medication when people are unwell. This medication is usually not prescribed for long term treatment of schizophrenia as it can be habit forming and you can have some withdrawal if it's suddenly stopped after a longer period of use. Again, it's not advisable to suddenly stop any medication without the patient consulting their doctor first. Doctors will cut this medication down when patients are well enough to stop it.

Other medication, such as antipsychotic medication, is given for long term treatment of schizophrenia. This medication isn't addictive and doesn't make someone 'high'. The patient won't crave it and they don't feel a need to

use more and more. If medication is stopped suddenly there can be a relapse of symptoms. This isn't due to addiction but because schizophrenia is a chronic illness. Antipsychotic medication stabilises the levels of brain chemicals such as dopamine and a sudden change in medication can therefore destabilise dopamine levels. This is why doctors, such as yourself, change doses of medication gradually so the brain has time to adjust to the new dose. The need to let the brain adjust to the dose of medication is also the reason why treating symptoms of schizophrenia may take some time and why medication needs to be taken without missing any days.

SIDE EFFECTS OF MEDS

Medication may have side effects such as being sleepy, increased salivation, feeling stiff and shaky or gaining weight. Not everyone who uses medication for schizophrenia (antipsychotics) will develop these side effects and if they occur they need to be discussed with the treating doctor. Often you, the doctor can change medication to improve side effects however risks and benefits of changing medication need to be weighed up



on an individual basis. Never stop medication without consulting a doctor even if there are side effects, as studies have shown most people will relapse at some point if they don't remain on medication. There's no cure for schizophrenia currently however, similarly to other chronic illnesses such as diabetes, it can be controlled with treatment.

ALLAYING FEARS

Patients may be afraid to seek help if they see symptoms of schizophrenia in themselves or their loved ones. There is the misperception that people will come and lock you away against your will in an institution. Just like when you have a chest infection, if you treat the symptoms early enough you can often be treated as an out patient and go for regular check ups. If a chest infection is untreated and becomes severe enough people need admission. Similarly, the longer schizophrenia is left untreated, the more severe the symptoms become and the longer it takes to get better. We know that doctors don't want to admit anyone against their will and will only do so if someone is very unwell and can't be managed as an outpatient as it's too risky for the patient or other people around them.

Doctors can work together with patients and if a patient doesn't want a medication they won't force them to take something against their will. The only time someone may be given medication or admitted without their consent is when they're too ill to consent; the same as if someone comes to hospital unconscious or so unwell they can't think clearly enough to make a decision on their treatment.

Early treatment is the best way to avoid becoming so sick in the first place. Sometimes people may not realise they're becoming sick and it's important that families speak to their doctor for advice if they notice a relative is showing signs of mental illness but the person themselves can't see they're getting sick.

WHO IS SCHIZOPHRENIC?

Some patients may not fully recover despite them and their families doing everything they can to treat it properly. The patient may need some support from families or not be able to work again - however there are also many patients who recover well. Just because someone has schizophrenia, it doesn't mean they can't function well in the workplace, as parents, spouses and friends. There are scientists,

lawyers, accountants and celebrities with schizophrenia. You have likely met someone with schizophrenia and never known they have it, just like any other chronic illness.

Sometimes people are afraid that people living with schizophrenia are violent. Movies and books may have portrayed people with schizophrenia in a negative light however it's important to remember this is fiction. While there are cases where a patient with schizophrenia is a danger to themselves or others, this is usually when they're unwell. There is stigma attached to schizophrenia, which is harmful and may contribute to the high rate of depression found in patients with schizophrenia.

It's important to remember schizophrenia is a medical illness that can affect anyone. People with schizophrenia are normal people who have an illness, similar to having asthma or high blood pressure and should not be perceived differently. It's a treatable illness and encouraging patients to seek help soon if there are symptoms of schizophrenia and remaining on treatment are the best ways to remain healthy. **MHM**

References available upon request