

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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The National Institutes of Health (NIH) hosted the State-of-the-Science Conference on Manifestations and Management of Chronic Insomnia from June 13-15, 2005. Such State-of-the-Science conferences are infrequent and important; they generally indicate that an area of medicine has advanced considerably or has been neglected and needs attention. Both are true of insomnia.

The last NIH conference on insomnia was held in 1983. That conference set the existing guidelines and treatment options for insomnia. At that time, benzodiazepines were the “new” available treatment for insomnia and were recommended for short term use. Our knowledge, understanding and treatment options have increased greatly since then.

The purpose of this 3-day conference was to describe the present state of science concerning manifestations and management of chronic insomnia. The meeting was open to the public and included NIH representatives, healthcare professionals and other experts. Speakers at the conference in Bethesda discussed the nature of the problem of insomnia, its prevalence and the current state of understanding of causes and treatments for insomnia. The 12-page consensus document that summarizes the state of knowledge about insomnia is provided elsewhere in the Journal.¹ This document as well as the Web casts of the actual presentations can be downloaded from the NIH Web site, <http://consensus.nih.gov/ta/026/026InsomniaPostConfIntro.htm>.

The abstracts presented at the conference provide a glimpse into the current understanding of insomnia and demonstrate the giant strides that have been made since 1983. The topics can be grouped into three areas: models of insomnia, prevalence and consequences of insomnia and treatment options. Both physiological and psychological models of insomnia are presented, and great stress is placed on the importance of developing an animal model of insomnia. Data from rats indicate brain differences that might help delineate the neural systems involved in the development of insomnia. This ultimately may lead to better and more focused treatments. Estimates that insomnia affects 6-15% of the population are not surprising and reinforce the statement that insomnia is the most common sleep complaint. Evidence that insomnia tends to persist over time and is a risk factor for developing depression

underlines the importance of effective long term treatment. This contrasts with the fact that most hypnotics have been shown to be effective for 5 weeks or less. Such a mismatch between the duration of the problem and the length of medication efficacy studied is a serious problem. However, data on behavioral treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy, stimulus control, and relaxation show effective short- and long-term effects.

The conference conclusion indicates that while there is growing understanding about insomnia, there are many areas where more research is needed. Important directions include the delineation of the mechanisms, causes, and clinical course of primary insomnia and long-term studies of pharmacological efficacy. As a direct result of this conference, NIH has recommended increased research to provide both longitudinal studies and longer randomized clinical treatment trials. It is also anticipated that future research effort will be directed at addressing the other areas of insomnia where knowledge is lacking as well.

For the millions of Americans who have insomnia, this conference is extremely important and puts the national spotlight on the issue of insomnia. Patient-based organizations such as the American Insomnia Association are trying to increase the awareness of insomnia among health care professionals and to provide resources to those with insomnia. This conference and the resulting paper are particularly important to them because they underscore the prevalence of the problem, the impact that it has on the lives of so many, and the limitations of current treatment. Some of this information is not surprising to those who have insomnia or healthcare professionals who treat individuals with insomnia. However, the NIH has provided a major step toward addressing the issue of insomnia and the needs of those who have insomnia. The results of this conference will likely direct research for decades and ultimately improve the lives of many.

REFERENCE

1. National Institutes of Health State of the Science Conference Statement Manifestations and Management of Chronic Insomnia in Adults. *J Clin Sleep Med* 2005;1(4):412-421.

Disclosure Statement

Dr. Arand has indicated no financial conflict of interest.

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